

IN LOVE IN A MOVIE:  
WOMEN AND CONTEMPORARY ROMANTIC COMEDY

By

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For Olivia and Grace

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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School  
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This dissertation looks at the romantic comedies of the 1980s and 1990s in their historical context—that is, post-Sexual Revolution, post-Civil Rights, post-AIDS America. More specifically, I examine how these texts speak to women attempting to navigate this uncertain sexual and social climate. Like Tania Modleski, I see feminine popular culture—and women’s responses to it—as complicated and often contradictory. Because they often present quite constrictive fantasies for women attempting to make sense of modern sexuality, romantic comedies are generally dismissed as patriarchal wish-fulfillment. I argue, however, that they can also be read for more progressive views of gender and contemporary sexual relationships. One of my primary concerns in this study is the tension between these two positions—a tension that grows directly out of the moment in which these films are produced.

In this project I explore women’s highly complex relationship to romantic comedy through textual analysis of specific film texts and stars (I include chapters on the

romantic comedies of both Meg Ryan and Julia Roberts, as well as sections on race and romantic comedy and the recent emergence of the “Bridget Jones” narrative and its implications for the genre across forms) and contextual analysis of the genre’s specific moment. I draw on a number of critical methodologies, including Janice Radway and Tania Modleski’s studies of popular culture for women, the feminist psychoanalytic work of such critics as Jessica Benjamin and Laura Mulvey, writings on race and ethnicity by Franz Fanon, bell hooks and others, and the studies of stars and stardom by critics such as Richard Dyer. I examine contemporary romantic comedy as part of a larger conversation for and about women, including both popular representations and institutional discourses on sex, the family, and female employment.

INTRODUCTION:  
“THAT’S A CHICK’S MOVIE”: CONTEMPORARY ROMANTIC COMEDY  
AND THE FEMALE SPECTATOR

Things are a little different now. First you have to be friends. You have to like each other. Then you neck. This could go on for years. Then you have tests, and then you get to do it with a condom. The good news is you split the check.

Jay (Rob Reiner), *Sleepless in Seattle*

Near the middle of Nora Ephron’s *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), Meg Ryan and Rosie O’Donnell sit in Ryan’s apartment tearfully watching the classic Cary Grant/Deborah Kerr romance *An Affair to Remember*. After a particularly poignant exchange between Grant and Kerr, O’Donnell sobs, “Men never *get* this movie!” This scene is a clear presentation of an image with which I both identify and want to contend: a woman watching and being moved by a romantic movie.<sup>1</sup> I begin with Ephron’s film, partly because it is a longtime personal favorite, but mainly because it evokes the questions I will address in this project. How do contemporary romantic comedies reinforce traditional (patriarchal) notions of sex and (hetero) sexual relationships? What position(s) do they construct for the female spectator? What moments of pleasure or resistance do they offer her? And how, despite their often conservative overtones, do these films continue to appeal to women—many of whom would identify themselves as feminist? I will argue contemporary romantic comedy’s appeal lies mainly in its direct address to women’s anxieties about modern sexuality.

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<sup>1</sup> This opening borrows, at least in part, from the first chapter of Mary Ann Doane’s *The Desire to Desire*. Doane begins her study of women and the 1940’s melodrama with a similar image of female spectatorship—in this case, Mia Farrow as the “enraptured” film fan in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1).

In the 1980s, critics such as Tania Modleski broke new theoretical ground by arguing for “mass-produced fantasies for women” as subjects of serious intellectual inquiry. Modleski’s work on gothic novels, Harlequin romances, and soap operas has revealed the complexities of these texts and their relationship to their female consumers. The “enormous and continuing popularity” of romance novels and soap operas, Modleski argues, “suggests that they speak to very real problems and tensions in women’s lives” (*Loving* 14). In her study of female romance novel readers, Janice Radway likewise argues the romance does not simply force its (often conservative) ideology on its readers. Radway’s study reveals “the complicated and contradictory ways in which the romance recognizes and thereby protests the weaknesses of patriarchy and the failure of traditional marriage even as it apparently acts to assert the perfection of each” (221). Like the Harlequin novel and the soap opera, the romantic comedy is a complex text that addresses its viewers in contradictory ways. Yet, while Modleski, Radway and others have produced important work on various “female” popular forms, very little has been done on romantic comedy’s (particularly contemporary romance’s) address to women. To date, there has not been a full-length work on contemporary Hollywood romance that focuses on the genre’s appeal and address to female spectators.

Romantic comedies (particularly contemporary films) are often dismissed as “fluff” at best and regressive, patriarchal wish-fulfillment at worst. Yet, we should not underestimate the importance of these films in our culture. Box office figures indicate that they continue to appeal to large numbers of (presumably female) viewers. Of the films I will discuss here, several earned over \$100 million during initial theatrical release. *Pretty Woman* (1990), for example, grossed nearly \$180 million, and *Sleepless in Seattle*

just over \$125 million (Rubinfeld 71). Although ticket sales may not be a foolproof measure of a film's cultural importance, it is difficult to deny that a picture earning \$180 million has some sort of cultural significance, especially when we consider that that figure is in 1990 dollars. "Fluff" or not, these films are designed for and marketed to a mass audience, and they often succeed in reaching that audience. Perhaps more significant than box office receipts is the way a number of romantic comedies have become part of our popular lexicon. "Harry and Sally," for example, has become a kind of shorthand for a long-term platonic relationship that finally becomes romantic. Similarly, "Bridget Jones" has recently become a popular signifier both of the single, slightly hapless urban working girl and of a new popular genre known as "chick lit." The huge financial and cultural impact of romantic comedy is one compelling reason to give the genre as much critical attention as has been given other more ostensibly weighty texts.

More importantly, romantic comedy can be an important indicator of a culture's anxieties and expectations about sex roles and relationships. As Frederic Jameson argues, following Norman Holland, one of the jobs of a cultural text is to manage the fears and desires of that culture. Jameson writes that

the psychic function of the work of Art must be described in such a way that . . . two inconsistent and even incompatible features of aesthetic gratification—on the one hand the wish-fulfilling function, but on the other the necessity that its symbolic structure protect the psyche against the frightening and potentially damaging eruption of powerful archaic desires and wish-material—be somehow harmonized and assigned their place as twin drives of a single structure. (25)

For some critics, genre films are particularly adept at harmonizing these twin drives. Frank Krutnik asserts that "in general, generic forms [act] as a functional interface between the cinematic institution, audiences, and the wider realm of culture" (57).

According to Krutnik, romantic comedy can be an indicator of a culture's changing sexual mores. "In the case of romantic comedy," he writes, "it is particularly important to stress how specific films or cycles mediate between a body of conventional 'generic rules' . . . and a shifting environment of sexual-cultural codification" (57-58). The romances that began to appear in the 1980s, for example, appeared during a period of continuing cultural and sexual upheaval. It is within this uncertain climate, I will argue, that the romantic comedy most directly attempts to address the fears and desires of its female viewers.

As part of this attempt, romantic comedies of the 1980s and 90s present scenarios in which the protagonists find what these films assume a (woman) viewer wants most of all—true love and emotional security with one special person meant for her. As we will see, these fantasies are often presented in the voice of the patriarchy. Steve Neale contends that the "dominant ideological tendency" of contemporary romantic comedy is to return the female to a "traditional and ideologically conventional position" (298, 297). One of the clearest messages the romantic comedy seems to send women is the importance of finding "the" heterosexual relationship meant for her, above and beyond any other concerns. The content of these cinematic fantasies is, to varying degrees, nearly always the same: ostensibly independent but really vulnerable, neurotic career girl (almost always approaching or having passed a "certain age"—in this case, thirty) meets the Man Who is Meant For Her. He may or may not be wealthy, but he will almost always be smart, funny, unthreateningly handsome, and able to see the heroine for who she really is. After ninety minutes or so of charming banter and the intervention of friends, circumstances—and in some cases destiny, fate or magic—the two end the film

in each other's arms, either at their wedding or clearly bound for it. Misunderstandings and other obstacles may arise, but in the end the woman ends up in a safe, monogamous relationship with a man who will, we assume, love and take care of her forever.

The conservative pull of these scenarios perhaps manifests itself most clearly in the way romantic comedies represent female sexuality. The dialogue and character details may tell us that a romantic comedy heroine has a sexual history—indeed, she may even be involved in a sexual relationship when the film opens. Yet, particularly in the romantic comedies of the 1980s and 90s, these women are often presented as somehow sexually innocent—or, at the very least, they are not sexually threatening. Very few contemporary romantic comedy heroines are portrayed engaging in sexual activity, and almost none actively initiate sex. Meg Ryan's romantic comedy persona, for example, is constructed largely on a notion of female sexual purity and wholesomeness, as is, to a lesser extent, Sandra Bullock's. A notable exception to the sexually innocent romantic comedy heroine occurs in *Pretty Woman*, in which Julia Roberts portrays a prostitute. Even in this film, however, female agency is ultimately contained by the patriarch. The only time Roberts's character actually engages in onscreen sex is with the film's billionaire capitalist male lead. Thus, she becomes a strangely chaste hooker, saved for the pleasure of the patriarchal representative. (As I discuss in Chapter Four, this particular feature of the contemporary romance will change with the emergence of the more sexually proactive "chick movie" and "chick lit" heroine in the late 1990s.)

The women in these films, however, are rewarded for their sacrifices with the ideal relationship with the perfect hero. Each romantic comedy constructs its central romance in ways that urge the heroine—and her counterpart in the theater—to desire that



relationship above anything else. Editing, music and mise-en-scène both signify the rightness of the romance and help efface the films' more problematic ideologies. This is perhaps clearest in these films' romantic closing scenes. Cultural texts repress anxieties, according to Jameson, "by the narrative construction of imaginary resolutions and the projection of an optical illusion of social harmony"(25-26). In the romantic comedy, this resolution is often literal—the happy romantic ending that places, not only the central couple, but often the supporting characters, in their rightful place with the film's universe. The stylistic elements of these closing scenes—tears, romantic music, and of course, *The Kiss*—help erase the tensions that may have colored the preceding ninety minutes and leave the viewer with a sense of well-being.

Consider, for example, the endings of *Pretty Woman* and *You've Got Mail*. In both films, the female protagonists have suffered loss—and in the case of *Woman*, violence—due to their relationships with the films' "heroes." Yet, the most popular images from *Pretty Woman* are Julia Roberts shopping on Rodeo Drive and Richard Gere climbing a fire escape to "rescue" her at the film's end (her assertion that she'll "rescue him right back" notwithstanding). By the final scene, the viewer has been asked to forget that this true-love relationship began as a transaction between a hooker and her john. Likewise, the gorgeous garden setting, sentimental rendition of "Over the Rainbow" on the film's soundtrack, and Meg Ryan's tears at the end of *You've Got Mail* help the audience forget that her hero is the man who just destroyed the family business that linked her to her late mother. Any questions that their central couples are meant to be together forever are effaced (at least in a successful romance) by the final credits.

In addition to papering over their tensions through music or mise-en-scène, some romantic comedies manage the larger culture's anxieties by ignoring any possible conflicting alternatives to heterosexual monogamy. J. M. Bernstein, in his introduction to the essays of T. W. Adorno, writes that "the effectiveness of the culture industry depends not on its parading an ideology, or disguising the true nature of things, but in removing the thought that there is any alternative to the status quo" (10-11). As a genre, romantic comedy has historically championed the (sexual) status quo, both in its stylistic and its narrative conventions. In each film a man and woman meet, are presented as destined for each other, and (with some variations) end up in a committed relationship. Minor doubts about the central couple may be raised by the presence of the hero or heroine's "wrong partner" or the more unorthodox behavior of some best friend/foil characters, but until very recently the genre's gender assumptions have remained largely unquestioned. "Romance" means the journey of a *man* and a *woman* toward monogamy, if not always matrimony. The notion that *The Philadelphia Story* (1940)'s Tracy Lord would choose Elizabeth Imbrie over either of her male suitors, or that Harry would embark on a romance with best buddy Jess rather than best friend Sally in *When Harry Met Sally . . .* is not presented as a transgressive choice that must be repressed—it simply is not offered as an option. This is not to say that queer readings of these films are not possible, or that the possibility of such readings is not the primary source of pleasure for some spectators. In addition, a number of recent films, such as *Kissing Jessica Stein*, have portrayed same-sex romances, with varying results and viewer reactions. Still, most mainstream romantic comedies continue not only to act as if a sexual relationship between a man and a woman

is the best choice, but also to efface—at least in their overt construction—the possibilities of other choices.

Yet, the conservative operations of most romantic comedies' construction of female sexual agency can be offset—at least in part—by the films' attempts to present their female protagonists' behavior and attitudes in a way that reflects contemporary sexual mores. The women in these films may not be sexually threatening, but neither are they expected to apologize or atone for *having* sexual histories. Julia Roberts' character in *Runaway Bride*, for example, may be embarrassed about leaving four different men at the altar, but there is never any sense—at least not an overt sense—in which she should be embarrassed about having been involved in what we can assume were sexual relationships with each of these men. Likewise, Nia Long's character sleeps with at least two men over the course of *Love Jones* (1997). Yet, while she experiences the typical difficulties and misunderstandings of most romantic comedy heroines on the way to True Love, the film never presents her sexual activity as something to be questioned or—as in the case of many classical Hollywood films—to be punished. These nods toward female agency (which I argue in Chapter Four are more clearly foregrounded in the chick culture texts of the late 1990s and onward), however, are ultimately quite weak. Feminine sexuality in the contemporary romantic comedy does not need to be contained, precisely because it is not excessive. It almost always remains safely within the boundaries established by patriarchy.

Perhaps a more effective fantasy offered by contemporary romantic comedy is that of “having it all.” In a number of romances the heroine is able to be economically and socially independent *and* enter into a traditional romantic relationship. In *Runaway Bride*

and *Sweet Home Alabama* (2002), for example, the heroines end with literally the best of both worlds. They get to keep their careers (in both cases, growing design businesses) and their romances with their soul-mates. As an added bonus, they even find a way to split their time between the idyllic beauty of the small town and the excitement and business opportunities offered by New York City. These resolutions present an almost utopian vision of women's place in contemporary culture in ways that are no doubt meant to appeal to female viewers trying to juggle their own relationship and career concerns. For spectators trying to make their way through the workforce and maintain their relationships—especially those women who must work the “second shift” of housekeeping and child care when they get home from their paid jobs—the fantasy of a mate who would make such huge compromises is no doubt powerful. These two conclusions, however, are admittedly almost too utopian, even for romantic comedies. In many other cases, romantic comedy must efface the woman's professional agency in some way before the happy romantic ending can be attained.

Indeed, in a number of these films, including *You've Got Mail* and *The Wedding Planner* (2001), the heroine must give up—or at least jeopardize—a promising career or business in order to be with the man for whom the text intends her. Even in those films where the heroine's career is not at stake, the narrative diminishes her professional concerns against the importance of the central romantic relationship. *When Harry Met Sally . . .*'s Sally, for example, is a journalist, and her friend Marie is a department store window display designer. These characters' careers would never be clear to the audience, however, if they were not stated in the dialogue. Neither woman is

ever shown in her workplace, and their conversations focus almost exclusively on their romantic relationships.

Further, although nearly all the women in contemporary romantic comedies work, the jobs or career fields ascribed to them are often feminized in some way, either because they are jobs traditionally filled by women or because they are flexible enough to allow the heroine time to pursue the romance—and, we would expect, to raise a family when the time comes. A survey of the jobs held by romantic comedy heroines reveals teachers (*French Kiss* (1995) and *Only You* (1994)), secretaries or assistants (*Working Girl* (1989) and *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001)), and a preponderance of writers (*When Harry Met Sally . . .*, *Sleepless in Seattle*, *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), *Brown Sugar*). In addition, some of the jobs held by women in romantic comedy are feminized by their relation to larger patriarchal institutions (the eponymous *Wedding Planner*, the prostitute in *Pretty Woman*, and the actress in *Notting Hill*). The few traditionally “professional” women, such as the executives in *Baby Boom* (1987) and *Kate and Leopold* (2001), end up rejecting these traditionally masculine career positions for lifestyles more conducive to the more feminine roles of home-maker and mother. The independent career girl in most romantic comedies, then, is almost always constructed in such a way that she is still reconcilable with patriarchal notions of women's work and feminine identity.

Still, the representations of working women in contemporary romantic comedies are arguably a step forward from the dependent, immature socialites and heiresses of classical Hollywood comedies like *It Happened One Night* (1934), *My Man Godfrey* (1936), and *Bringing Up Baby* (1938). Even in those few studio-era romances featuring strong career women, such as *His Girl Friday* (1940) and *Woman of the Year* (1942), the

woman's career is often the question that drives the narrative, rather than the given that it is in contemporary films. While contemporary heroines may have to give up or divert attention from their professional lives, their presence in the workforce is never a subject of questioning or controversy. Though the narratives' focus on the woman's need for romance may ultimately work to undercut this notion of independence in some of contemporary romances, these characters are still granted a degree of agency their predecessors were not. Films such as *You've Got Mail* and *The Wedding Planner* may end up constraining their female leads, but both characters are portrayed as successful career women who love their jobs and enjoy professional respect. *Brown Sugar* (2002), the story of a romance between a well-respected music journalist and her long-time best friend (a record company executive), presents an even more hopeful portrait of a contemporary career woman balancing professional and romantic desires. The heroine's talent and devotion to her career are not deprecated, and at the end of the film she is able to have both career and romance without having to choose between the two.

These shifts in representation are necessary, of course, to keep pace with a culture in which the working woman is the rule rather than the exception—and to appeal to spectators who most likely identify with a female protagonist who work than with one who lives off the family fortune. These ostensibly more independent characters reflect, to some extent, the changes in women's education and employment since the 1960s. In a 1997 report in *Industrial Labor Relations Review*, Linda Datcher Lowry states that the number of women between the ages of 25 and 34 who had at least some college education rose six percent over the 1980s ("The Gender Earnings Gap"). Just as they became more visible in colleges and universities, women entered the work force in even

greater numbers during this period. Karen V. Lombard reports in a 1999 *Economic Inquiry* article on women's presence in the job marketplace that "overall, the female employment rate increased from 49% in 1975 to 67% in 1991" ("Women's Rising Market Opportunities"). The education and career of the romantic comedy heroine undoubtedly serve as a point of identification for contemporary female spectators, many of whom have education and career aspirations of their own. This point of identification thus becomes a space in which the spectator can vicariously experience the romance.

While their narratives may often work to limit their heroine's sexuality or professional identity, however, the narrative *structures* of many contemporary romantic comedies are one element that offers a more progressive construction of female agency. The women in many of these films are equal participants in their love stories on a structural level, even if not always in their expression of desire.<sup>2</sup> As I discuss in my chapter on the Meg Ryan films, a number of contemporary romantic comedies employ alternating scenes and shots to make both of the leads actors in the narrative, rather than positioning one as a subject an object of desire. Some recent texts have even begun to tell the love story almost exclusively from the woman's point of view, as we will see in Chapter Four. Chick lit and chick flicks like *Bridget Jones's Diary* and its film adaptation use diary format, first-person narration and voice-over, flashbacks, and fantasy sequences to foreground the story as the heroine's. Certainly some classical Hollywood romances like *Woman of the Year*, *His Girl Friday* and *The Awful Truth* (1937) gave their female leads equal—or even primary—place in the narrative. Many of these films,

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<sup>2</sup> An interesting example is the construction of Julia Roberts's character in films like *Pretty Woman*, *Notting Hill* and *Runaway Bride*. In these films Roberts is positioned as an object of desire or riddle to be solved. This notion will be explored further in my chapter on Roberts's films.

however (particularly those starring Katharine Hepburn), seem fraught with anxieties over the woman's diegetic and structural equality.

The promises of contemporary romances, whether the traditional idea of home, hearth and heterosexual monogamy or the arguably more progressive vision of feminine agency and independence, operate against the anxieties lurking beneath the films' glossy, romantic surfaces, whether fears of sexually-transmitted disease or sexual violence, or uncertainty about gender roles in a post-sexual revolution climate. It is in their address to these anxieties, perhaps, that contemporary romantic comedies perform their most important operations. Most significantly, they construct a safe space in which the spectator can experience the pleasures of modern sexuality without immediately encountering its harsher realities. This sense of safety rests in part on the old-fashioned tone of many these films. On one level, of course, this return to tradition can be read as an attempt to avoid completely the realities of contemporary sexual relationships by retreating to a simpler time, particularly by returning women to their traditional roles. To a certain extent, the world of these films is free of confusion over sex roles or anxieties about disease and violence because—at least on the surface—these issues do not exist in this world. Romantic comedy heroines rarely have to work through the complexities of what it means to be a woman in a heterosexual relationship in post-women's movement, post-sexual revolution culture, and they certainly do not have to face the trauma of sexual assault or the threat AIDS. (A notable exception occurs in *Pretty Woman*, the only romantic comedy in this study in which the woman is actually physically assaulted. The film manages to allay the fears evoked in this scene raises, however, by having the woman immediately rescued by the film's hero.)



The pressure to assuage these anxieties is a reason for the predominance of the sexually wholesome contemporary romantic comedy heroine. These less overtly sexual heroines are a departure from the newly liberated, sexually active women in 1970s films like *Annie Hall* (1977) and *An Unmarried Woman* (1978). Perhaps it is surprising that romantic comedy begins returning to sexual modesty just as the larger culture is becoming ostensibly more open about sexual issues. These more chaste romances, however, speak to the anxieties raised by the culture's increasing sexual openness. After the emergence of AIDS and heightened awareness of other sexually-transmitted diseases, the sex act began to carry connotations of danger and even death. The decreased portrayals of sex in contemporary romantic comedy signify an attempt to preserve the illusion and the fantasy of romance while erasing the disturbing implications of modern sexuality. As I discuss above, these shifts also signify what Neale calls the attempt to "counter any 'threat' of female independence" (in this case female sexual independence) in the decades following the women's movement (299)

Read another way, however, the responses of these films to issues of modern sexuality and gender relations may not be as reactionary as they initially appear. To begin with, even the romances with the most traditional tone cannot completely contain the fears and questions about contemporary relationships that have circulated in the popular consciousness for decades. Tom Hank's character in *Sleepless in Seattle* learns that the realities of post-AIDS sexuality may mean splitting the dinner check, but it also means delaying sexual intercourse (which will take place with the use of a condom when it finally occurs) until both parties can be tested. Because such anxieties cannot be fully contained, the traditional romantic setting and tone of contemporary comedies thus

becomes a backdrop against which to address such concerns. Rather than the solution, old-fashioned romance becomes a means of approaching questions of sexual equality, women's roles in contemporary society, and the specter of disease and violence in our culture. As we will see, the solutions that contemporary romances may often be conservative, but they can also be more complex than they may at first appear. They include questioning and reworking traditional ideas about gender relationships and sexuality and the de/reconstruction of generic formulas and expectations. Through all this reworking and revision, however, these films are able to maintain the sense of romance and magic that reinforces their appeal.

We cannot deny that romantic comedies exhibit many conservative tendencies, and we would be right to problematize them on these grounds. But we should not dismiss these films out of hand as regressive, nor should our engagement with them end at a critique of their patriarchal ideologies. Tania Modleski argues that we should not "deplore [popular romantic] texts for their . . . conservative affirmations," but let them "inform us of the contradictions they are meant to conceal" (*Loving* 113). The fantasies in romantic comedies, no matter how regressive, are offered to fulfill certain needs and desires in their female spectators' lives. Though some elements of romantic comedy may be highly problematic, we should not underestimate the pleasures these more traditional operations may provide a contemporary audience. The traditional constructions of gender at work in these films may prove comforting in an era where the rules are constantly being rewritten, or even broken. And the "safe," old-fashioned relationships they portray could hold powerful appeal for women continually bombarded with discourses of sexual assault and harassment, ticking biological clocks, and the

impossibility of "having it all." When we begin to understand the appeal of these fantasies, we can begin to question, in Modleski's words, "the conditions which have made them necessary" in the first place.

Beneath their rather simplistic surfaces, then, contemporary romantic comedies perform quite complex tasks. Equally complex are the responses available to the viewers or readers who engage these texts. Although these films offer compelling conservative fantasies, we would be unjust to characterize their female viewers as simply "longing, overinvolved spectator[s]" who spend "wet, wasted afternoons" repeatedly viewing the same texts and automatically absorbing those texts' (conservative) ideologies (*Desire* 2, Haskell 154). Bernstein writes that "watching television or the latest Hollywood movie is not a sign that one has, after all, lost the capacity for reflection; that one cannot simultaneously see through the manipulation at work and sustain a critical distance from what is on offer" (12). In "The Culture Industry Reconsidered," Adorno, often seen as one of the most vocal critics of mass culture, also points—with an admittedly more negative tone—to the double-consciousness with which spectators consume popular culture and its meanings:

It may also be supposed that the consciousness of the consumers themselves is split between the prescribed fun which is supplied to them by the culture industry and a well-hidden doubt about its blessings . . . People are not only, as the saying goes, falling for the swindle; if it guarantees them even the most fleeting gratification they desire a deception which is nonetheless transparent to them. They force their eyes shut and voice approval, in a kind of self loathing, for what is meted out to them, knowing fully the purpose for which it is manufactured. (103)

I do take some issue with Adorno's image of the self-deceiving, "self loathing" popular culture consumer, and it should also be noted that he goes on to argue strongly for the culture industry's propensity to "drill" the "status quo" into its consumers. What is important for my purposes here, however, is the notion that a spectator of a popular film

must not simply absorb that film's ideology if she is to take pleasure in it. I would further argue that contemporary spectators are able to remain conscious of a film or television show's problematic aspects, even in those products for which they have a great affection.<sup>3</sup>

Through what structures and functions, then, do romantic comedies address the fears and desires of their (female) spectators? Feminist film theory based in psychoanalysis and semiotics has proven immensely useful for exposing the processes by which cinema constructs its meanings and positions its spectator(s) to receive these meanings—two points of particular interest to this study. The content of these fantasies is important, especially as it pertains to gender (the woman still ends up subordinating her needs to those of the man), race (despite the increasing number of “ethnic” romances, the majority of faces visible in romantic comedy are still white), class (both the hero and heroine are often middle- or upper-middle-class professionals, unless class is an issue in the relationship, in which case it will be eradicated with the couple's union) and sexuality (most contemporary romances are still driven by a central heterosexual narrative). However, the appeal of these fantasies comes just as much from their structure as fantasies as from their content. Elizabeth Cowie, using Freud's work on fantasy and Lacan's theories of the (partial) drives, characterizes fantasy as a “setting” or “mise-en-

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<sup>3</sup> Internet sites like FameTracker.com and Televisionwithoutpity.com provide forums for discussing a vast array of pop culture texts, including movies, television shows and magazines. Many of those who post on these sites exhibit the double-consciousness I'm speaking of, as they at once point out the shortcomings of (or “snark” on) particular films or shows (often on an ideological or political basis) and express affection for these same texts. Posters at the *General Hospital* forum on Television Without Pity, for example, regularly point out not only the drama's narrative inconsistencies, but its continuing misogyny. Some have even gone so far as to participate in “Target GH,” a campaign to enlighten the program's sponsors to its often brutal treatment of its female characters. While remaining conscious of these problems, however, these viewers are still able to find pleasure (albeit a questioning, critical one) in a show in which many have invested years, or even decades.

scène of desire," rather than its object (133). She explains that "Fantasy is first and foremost not a wish for X, but a scenario, a structure of positions and relationships for the subject, and the 'apparent' wishes may tell us little or nothing about this scenario and its relationships" (163). Fantasy scenarios, including films, become as important as "structure[s] of positions" as they are for their manifest content. Following Cowie's theory, then, we could say that the spectator may identify with a film character, not through that character's particulars (age, race, class, specific object of desire, etc.) but through her position as a desiring subject. Conceiving of film fantasy as a set of positions rather than as a specific wish may explain the appeal of a romantic comedy to those a viewer may not identify with the film's specifics. A spectator of *Pretty Woman*, for example, may not specifically identify with Julia Roberts's desire to be rescued by rich, white Richard Gere into an exclusive, permanent relationship, but with that character's position as lover/beloved. Although Cowie points out that most of the positions offered by a film fantasy are already pre-determined and "orchestrated by the [film's] narration," this conception of fantasy as position rather than content may also explain how the romantic comedy spectator can enjoy and identify with a film's protagonists as desiring subject/object of desire without expressing a wish for the often conservative ways in which those positions manifest themselves in a particular film.

The fantasies offered by romantic comedies depend on visual elements such as stylish costumes and sets, bustling cityscapes, and attractive leads to create what Cowie calls "forepleasure," or that set of "aesthetic devices which open us to . . . the play of desire" (150). The visual pleasure of romantic comedy is different from other genres like film noir, where the visual field becomes a space for the erotic display of the female

object. Contemporary romantic comedy does not seem to construct the female as the object of the (male) gaze in the same way that other classical genres have. This is perhaps in part because it often presents its heroines as the agents of desire rather than as erotic objects. A number of these films, however, continue to position the female as erotic spectacle. This is especially so, as we will see, in the romantic comedies starring Julia Roberts<sup>4</sup>. Critics like Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane have effectively used psychoanalysis to examine the ways the cinematic apparatus attaches meaning to the female figure on the screen and the way it positions spectators along a gender divide. Mulvey's theory of gendered spectatorship and Doane's work on femininity as masquerade will be instrumental in exposing the ways that contemporary romantic comedy continues to construct the female as lack or as object for the male gaze.

Because contemporary romantic comedy appears to be aimed at eliciting and examining female desire, however, and because "visual pleasure" traditionally has been considered a product of masculine spectatorship, it is perhaps necessary to find other means of discussing the pleasures these films offer their female spectators.<sup>5</sup> De Lauretis argues that underlying any visual pleasure or meaning the spectator may obtain from the filmic image is her engagement with the film's narrative process, which she defines as "a condition of signification and identification processes" on which "the very possibility or

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<sup>4</sup> While Julia Roberts may be an exception among white romantic comedy leads, the genre still tends to eroticize its heroines of color, as played by Vivica A. Fox, Jennifer Lopez and Salma Hayek. The gendered, ethnic or racial body as erotic spectacle will be a crucial point in my chapter on race and ethnicity in romantic comedy.

<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that the females in these films cannot provide erotic visual pleasure to their male (or female) spectators. I would further argue that many of the male leads in these films, such as Matthew McConaughey, Hugh Grant and Taye Diggs, can—and have been—constructed as erotic spectacle in the most traditional sense of that term. My point is that since contemporary romantic comedy so often seems to sublimate sex on the markers of (often old-fashioned) romance, the genre rarely presents either of its protagonists as erotic objects in a conscious way. (There are exceptions to this notion—see my note above.) Thus, the source of its pleasures may more practically be found elsewhere.

impossibility of 'seeing' is dependent" (*Alice* 80). According to de Lauretis, "images are already overdetermined by narrative through symbolic inscription of desire." She explains that "positions of identification, visual pleasure itself, then are reached only *après coup*, as after-effects of an engagement of subjectivity in the relations of meaning, relations which involved and mutually bind image and narrative" (*Alice* 80). With the exception of the mystery or detective story, romantic comedy is perhaps the genre that depends the most on the spectator's involvement in a film's narrative trajectory. One of the greatest pleasures romantic comedy offers its audience is that of following a romance from the initial encounter to the final scene of marriage or commitment. Generic conventions may assure the viewer of the happy ending, but the fun comes in watching the couple's journey to the romantic conclusion.<sup>6</sup>

Any work that examines positions and pleasures films offer their (female) spectators must address, in de Lauretis's words, "the non-coincidence of woman and women" (*Alice* 36). This distinction between "Woman" and "women" has been a concern of feminist criticism since the 1980s. In terms of film studies, this opposition plays out to some extent in the difference between the textually-constructed "subject," theorized by psychoanalysis and semiotics, and the "actual" viewer in the theater, the subject of more empirical historical and social studies. At times the two methodologies have seemed mutually exclusive. De Lauretis defines "woman" as "a fictional construct, a distillate from diverse but congruent discourses dominant in Western cultures . . . which works as

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<sup>6</sup> Assuming, of course, that the "journey" is presented in a believable, enjoyable way. Many recent romantic comedies, however, have come to rely on hackneyed plot devices like mistaken identity (*Maid in Manhattan*) and bets or agreements that force the couple to deceive each other (*How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*) as a means of creating the romance. This is perhaps why critics and viewers have begun to complain that the genre has become especially clichéd and predictable.

both their vanishing point and their specific condition of existence" (*Alice* 5). In psychoanalytic theory, it is woman's lack of the phallus—and the male need to disavow this lack—that makes her the "specific condition" of cultural production. Due to her status as lack, however, "Woman" can never produce meaning on her own, but must be, to use Laura Mulvey's word, its "bearer" ("Visual Pleasure" 15).

De Lauretis goes on to add that "woman" is a separate concept from "women." She describes "women" as "the real historical beings who cannot as yet be defined outside of discursive formations, but whose material existence is nonetheless certain" (*Alice* 5-6). These "real historical" women are involved, not only in the production, but also in the consumption of cultural texts. The problem of Woman's/women's place in symbolic production becomes significant for this study when we consider that so many contemporary romantic comedies focus on female desire and are—at least in part—the result of real women's creative efforts, whether as writers, directors or actors.

Like de Lauretis, feminist psychoanalytic theorists have also emphasized the distinction between the (feminine) subject as a textual construct and "real" historical women. "Feminist theory," Mary Ann Doane argues, "frequently and overhastily collapses the opposition between social and psychical subjects, closing the gap prematurely." (*Desire* 8). Doane states that "the female spectator (the spectator singled out and defined entirely by her sex) exists nowhere but as an effect of discourse, the focal point of an address" (*Desire* 8). She adds that the term is not meant to refer directly to the woman who buys her ticket and enters the movie theater as the member of an audience, sharing a social identity but retaining a unique psychical history" (*Desire* 8). Still, this "psychical history" does have an impact on spectator positioning and



engagement with the film—particularly when it comes to notions of gendered spectatorship. Doane writes that “men and women enter the movie theater as social subjects who have been compelled to align themselves in some way with respect to one of the reigning binary oppositions (that of sexual difference) which order the social field” (*Desire* 8). Although films offer spectators a variety of gendered positions, I will argue that contemporary romantic comedies primarily speak to those who, as Doane says, enter the theater having already aligned themselves on the feminine side of the gender binary.

De Lauretis also points out that viewers enter the multiplex having already taken on certain identities. She writes that “film spectators enter the movie theater as either men or women, which is not to say that they are simply male or female but rather that each person goes to the movies with a semiotic history, personal and social, a series of previous identifications by which she or he has been somehow engendered” (*Alice* 145). In *Technologies of Gender*, she builds on this point, adding that they are also positioned along more than gender lines. The spectator, she suggests, is “a subject constituted in gender, to be sure, though not by sexual difference alone, but rather across languages and cultural representations, a subject en-gendered in the experiencing of race and class, as well as sexual relations; a subject, therefore, not unified but rather multiple” (2). Though it is based primarily on notions of gender, romantic comedy speaks to its viewer’s class positions (*Pretty Woman*’s Cinderella story), race (the implicit ethnic stereotypes of *Two Can Play That Game* (2001)) and sexuality (including, but not limited to, the “gay best friend” romances of *My Best Friend’s Wedding* and *Object of My Affection* (1998)). While the primary focus of this project is on gender and spectatorship, I will also be

interested in how contemporary romantic comedy also positions its spectators at the intersection(s) of these multiple identities.

De Lauretis is a semiotician, and she avoids taking an essentialist position by pointing out that "the work of representation produces [sexual] differences that cannot be known in advance" (*Technologies* 7). Still she makes a compelling argument for the place of history and social circumstances in the construction of subjectivity. "The historical fact of gender," she writes, "the fact that it exists in social reality, that it has concrete existence in cultural forms and actual weight in social relations, makes gender a political issue that cannot be evaded or wished away." She adds that "even as we agree that sexuality is socially constructed and over-determined, we cannot deny the particular specification of gender that is the issue of that process (*Technologies* 38).

The experience of women as women in a specific historical moment will be of particular interest in this study. My central argument is that contemporary romantic comedy produces certain readings as a result of its place in a post-AIDS, post-sexual revolution, post-women's movement culture. These films construct certain fantasies about romance and sexual relationships at a time when such concepts have been undergoing continuous re-examination. At the same time, I recognize that even the historically specific spectator (if that term can even be defined) is constructed through her engagement with numerous, often convergent discourses. As Doane points out, then, the distinction between "woman" as textual construct and "women" as historical beings should not be "collapsed." Both sides of this opposition are important to an examination of a specific generic moment like the one I propose to undertake here. To that end, I will

engage in a synthesis of textual analysis of specific films along with an examination of the socio-historical conditions of their production and consumption.

I am conscious that my analysis of these texts does not assume a universal, ahistorical spectator. Film viewing (or any other type of textual interaction) is not simply a matter of a blank-slate spectator/reader unquestioningly absorbing a text's ideological premises, but as de Lauretis states above, the interaction of a subject with a particular semiotic history with a particular text. At the same time, however, I realize that even the experiences of "real" women must be seen as constructed narratives, rather than factual evidence. Maureen Turim writes that "we can perhaps use . . . information [on "real" women]," but cautions that such information should not be seen as "hard evidence of anything more than it is: a story to be deciphered, a story that has its own reasons for being formulated and deciphered" ("Spectatrix" 306). She suggests that historical or sociological work should be combined with textual analysis to "provide the context of reception, the range of possibilities, rather than determining a fixed reading." (307).

Because the individual subject's "real" experience cannot be known empirically, it is best read through the discourses that work together (and often compete) to construct it. In this project, these discourses will include not only the primary film texts under consideration, but the other texts that surround and interact with them. Because historical factors are neither discrete or concrete, I will approach the socio-historical conditions in which romantic comedies are produced and consumed, not as a set of facts or events, but as another set of texts to be read and analyzed. Reading these conditions as texts rather than as "facts" will allow for a socially constructed subject, but one constructed within a historically specific network of discourses. Such a reading will have an additional

benefit: Annette Kuhn suggests that seeing "representations, contexts, . . . and spectators . . . as a series of interconnected social discourses permits relative autonomy for the operations of texts, readings and contexts, and also allows for contradictions, oppositional readings, and varying degrees of discursive authority"<sup>7</sup> ("Women's Genres" 446). These contradictions and oppositional readings become even more important in the examination of a seemingly conservative genre like romantic comedy.

For my purposes, then, the "female spectator" is a subject who enters the movie theater having already been interpellated as female through her engagement with the various discourses circulating around her. Because her interaction with her larger culture is almost always a gendered interaction, she is most likely to respond to the film from a position of femininity. This is not to say that masculine spectator positions are not open to women viewers, or vice-versa. And this is not to argue for some essential notion of gender (or, for that matter, sexuality) from which each spectator engages with a cultural text. The work of de Lauretis, Judith Butler and others has shown that gender is not an essential, pre-existing given. The fact is, however, that most people do experience their identity as gendered beings automatically and without question, and this experience colors their engagement with cultural texts as much as it is colored by it. This understanding of subjectivity is crucial to my understanding of the experiences contemporary romantic comedy offers its viewers. Not only are the theoretical women

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<sup>7</sup> This notion of "interconnected social discourses" and the potential for resistance that might exist in such relationships evokes Michel Foucault's conception of power and discourse. Foucault sees power, not as a binary of privileged/disenfranchised, but as "the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate . . . as the process which, through, ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses [these relations]" (92). While Foucault recognizes that power is often (although temporarily) invested in particular bodies or institutions at particular moments, the notion that power is a shifting system of relations (rather than the totalizing "patriarchal power" model espoused by some feminist critics) seems particularly invaluable for a feminist practice that seek to understand the strength of the patriarchal system and at the same time find points of resistance to that system.

who watch these films as subjects already socialized according to gender, but they are continually being constructed by the very particular intricacies of gender as it is experienced the turn of the twenty-first century. This intersection of text and context is central to the experience of the romantic comedy spectator.

A thorough account of women's social and cultural circumstances at the end of the twentieth century is beyond the scope of this study (if, indeed, such a thing is even possible at all). What is clear, however, is that the decades following the height of the sexual revolution and the women's movement saw significant changes in definitions of gender and sex(uality), and in the institutions that circulate and enforce those definitions. Perhaps the institution that underwent the most important shifts by the end of the century was the institution of marriage. In her history of marriage in the United States, Nancy Cott states that by 1998 single people made up one-fourth of all U.S. households, and twenty-three percent of adults "declined to marry at all" (203). These statistics reflect the institution's dwindling moral and legal power following the upheavals of the 1960s and 70s. Cott writes that "the social as well as legal changes [of these decades] had [uncoupled] morality from marriage, [knocking] marriage from its position of pre-eminence as 'pillar of the state'" (199). She adds that with the "evaporation of the political role of marriage . . . the formality and conformity of marriage-like arrangements matter far less [at the turn of the millennium] than in the past" (213). Cott suggests that "it seems dubious that conventional legal marriage can ever recover the primacy it once had" (214).

As the marriage institution began losing political and moral force and the power to reify gender roles and relations, anxieties about gender and sexuality circulated even

more visibly in the larger culture. Public discourse on such issues as sexual equality and sexual violence, as well as the measures enacted to alleviate those issues, seemed to raise as many questions as they resolved. In the years following the height of the sexual revolution, writes Ruth Rosen, "men were confused and no longer knew how to behave around women. Women were baffled as well" (187). Rosen adds that during this time, very few people seemed to know what to do *about* sex. "Was sex a dangerous or pleasurable activity? Had the sexual revolution brought revolution or exploration? Feminists didn't agree, but neither did the rest of the nation" (196).

The object of these anxious discourses, particularly from the late 1970s through the 1980s, was the newly liberated, newly empowered, often single woman. On one hand, the discourse of feminism had entered the popular consciousness by the mid-1970s.

Rosen writes that

By [the mid-70s], the women's movement had spilled over its banks, creating hundreds, then thousands of new tributaries, as it flooded the nation. All over the country, women were discovering feminist perspectives on race, ethnicity, labor, spirituality, education and peace. 'Feminism' and 'sexism' had become common household words. (263)

But just as quickly as women seemed to embrace feminism, Rosen notes, they began to disavow it. She points out that by the 1980s, "Feminism' had already turned into a dirty word" (275).

The "backlash" against feminism, as Susan Faludi terms it, was apparent, among other ways, through the public discourses on the single woman that began circulating in the late 1970s and continued through the next decades. As more women began entering the workforce and choosing to marry later (or not at all), academic, government and popular discourses converged to construct a cautionary image of the desperate, childless woman who missed her chance and is doomed to spend her life alone. One of the most

famous contributions to this discourse was a 1986 Harvard-Yale marriage study that found that “a college-educated, unwed woman at thirty has a 20 percent likelihood of marriage, at thirty-five a 5 percent chance, and at forty no more than a 1.3 percent chance” (Faludi 3). The popular press was also preoccupied with “single women’s miseries” during this same period. Faludi notes that national magazines ran more than fifty features on single women between 1983 and 1986, “and almost all were critical or pitying” (97).

In film and television texts of the 1980s, the single woman was also often constructed as a cautionary tale. The television series *Murphy Brown* and *Cagney and Lacey*, while quite dissimilar generically, both featured female leads who both battled alcoholism and were unable to form a stable relationship with a man. Perhaps the most famous—and extreme—representation of the perils of singleness for women is Glenn Close’s performance as the psychotic, murderous Alex in the 1987 film *Fatal Attraction*. While many see *Fatal Attraction* as a warning to married men not to stray, the film serves as an even more potent discourse on the career-oriented, sexually aggressive unmarried female as psychotic. Alex may be a force to be reckoned with in the office, but she is a suicidal basket-case, a pathological liar who may not even be able to distinguish truth from fiction, an obsessed woman scorned, and, eventually, an attempted murderer. The ideological implications of this characterization become even more clear when contrasted with Anne Archer’s nurturing wife/earth mother character, who ends up killing Alex (thus protecting the traditional, patriarchally-dominated nuclear family). Within a very short time, “fatal attraction” became a short-cut term, not simply for sexual obsession, but for a specific pathology resulting from excessive female sexuality.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that romantic comedies with traditional romance narrative trajectories (as opposed to the more open endings of many 1970s romances) and a more “old-fashioned” romantic feel began to appear during the period of the backlash. Though certainly lighter in tone than texts like *Fatal Attraction*, they also act as spaces to work through the same questions of gender and sexual relationships, particularly the place of the single woman in a post-women’s movement sexual climate. While Sally in *When Harry Met Sally . . .* may not end up boiling the family pet, she is constructed to act on the same anxieties of contemporary single women as her darker *Fatal Attraction* counterpart. At one point, distraught over the impending marriage of an ex-boyfriend and her own perpetual singleness, she sobs that she’s “gonna be forty” someday, with the implication that time is running out for her to fulfill her role as wife and mother. The solution to Sally’s fears, as it is for many romantic comedy heroines of the 1980s and 90s, is to pair her off with a man she can marry and have babies with before her biological clock goes off. While the narratives may shift from the 1980s to the early years of the new millennium (especially, as I discuss in Chapter Four, with the emergence of chick flicks and chick lit), it is clear that contemporary romance is part of a larger network of (competing, often conservative) discourses aimed at women in late 20<sup>th</sup> century American culture.

This project is not intended as a comprehensive study of the romantic comedy genre, or even of all romantic comedies released since the 1980s. The impulse to attach a generic label to a loosely identified group of films has been called into question by critics like Rick Altman. In *Film/Genre*, Altman argues against the notion of a genre as a stable, fixed category. Instead, he asserts that genre should be “defined in a manner consistent



with the complexity of an overall situation made up of three-dimensional events spread out over space and time" (84). As I discuss above, the texts in this study share as many differences as they do similarities, but they are all products of the same larger socio-historical moment. In each, the romance becomes a space for working through the issues of their specific post-sexual revolution, post-"Women's Lib" cultural context. In this way, the films I examine have as much—or more—in common with other texts of the period, particularly the darker examinations of sexual relations like *Fatal Attraction* and *Basic Instinct* (1992), as they do with generic forebears like *His Girl Friday* or *Pillow Talk* (1959). *Fatal Attraction* and, for example, *Sleepless in Seattle* are two sides of the same coin. Though not generically similar, they are both discourses on, among other issues, the place of the single career woman at the turn of the millennium. Similarly, these two films share concerns with "chick lit" like the Bridget Jones novels or television shows like *Ally McBeal*—concerns that arise out of their shared cultural context and transcend genre or form. These texts and the stories they tell did not exist in any other period, not because no one had thought of them, but because the social and historical conditions necessary for their creation had not yet come about. In many ways, then, the decision to perform a study based on a very loose term like "contemporary romantic comedy" is an arbitrary one. Having said that, however, categories and labels can be useful tools for identifying important patterns in a group of similar works.

The texts in this study have been chosen for their narrative and stylistic similarities. As I stated earlier, nearly all of them tell the stories of professional women approaching or over thirty who enter into often combative flirtations with equally professional men. (Again, some variations in class or professional status do exist, but these differences are

almost always foregrounded as plot points to be solved by the film's end.) Most of the stories take place in urban settings, as in the case of New York films like *When Harry Met Sally* . . . or "city vs. small town" films like *Runaway Bride* (1999), and the setting is central to the romantic tone of the film. In each film, music, whether jazz and vocal standards, smooth R&B, or romantic contemporary pop, is equally important as a signifier of the type of romantic relationship being portrayed. The old-fashioned romance of *Sleepless in Seattle* is heightened through the use of standards by Nat King Cole and Jimmy Durante, while the African-American romance *Love Jones* (1997) uses songs by R&B artists like Lauryn Hill and Maxwell to establish not only a contemporary feel but to make the romance culturally specific.

Most importantly, most romances end on an upbeat note, with the central couple clearly bound for a monogamous heterosexual relationship.<sup>8</sup> While the narratives have similar endings, I have noted the development of two distinct trends in recent years. The first follows the more traditional trajectory of films like *Sleepless in Seattle* (often operating on ideas of destiny, romance or magic bringing the couple together), as seen in films like *Only You* (a shameless *Sleepless* rip-off) and *Serendipity* (2001). The other, following the success of *Bridget Jones's Diary* (both the novels and the film) focuses more on the female protagonist and her personal journey, and sometimes does not even conclude by placing the protagonist in a romantic relationship. This shift is apparent in

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<sup>8</sup> Exceptions to this rule exist, as well. Those films in which the couple do not end up together, however, are usually films which introduce gay characters or the possibility of a non-traditional, non-heterosexual romance. *My Best Friend's Wedding* ends, not with the central heterosexual couple, but with a dance between the heroine and her gay male friend. *The Object of My Affection*, which operates even more clearly as a "romance" between an ostensibly heterosexual (pregnant) woman and her gay male roommate, ends with the image of an extended "family": the woman, her child, and her new boyfriend; the roommate and his lover; and the father of the child and his girlfriend. Nearly all of the "straight" romantic comedies in this study, however, end with the union of the main couple.

shows like *Sex and the City* and many of the novels in Harlequin's Red Dress Ink line. Despite these shifts, however, the (potential) romance to be followed is still almost uniformly heterosexual. I've chosen to focus on romances that work toward heterosexual coupling because of what they can reveal in their ideological maneuvering. In order to provide a happy, believable romantic ending, these texts must give the spectator room to overlook or to come to terms with the often problematic means by which this ending has been achieved. The operations necessary to create such a space can be illuminating.

A number of films that qualify as romantic comedies will not be considered in this project. I have not, for example, included teen romances like *Clueless* (1995) or *Save the Last Dance* (2001). These are important films, and they merit serious critical inquiry. I feel, however, that they portray and are aimed at a generation that has come of age in a different period than the contemporary women at whom the films I discuss in this project are aimed. For the purposes of this study I am primarily interested in the generation that came of age during and immediately after the height of the Women's movement, and who would be well into adulthood by the eighties or nineties. I have also not included "period" romances or literary adaptations such as the many Jane Austen films, *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), or *Shag* (1989) (set in the early 1960s). These films raise additional issues of translation from one form to another and historicity that, while certainly significant, may complicate the issues at hand. For similar reasons, I have avoided films that combine genres, such as the adventure/romances *Romancing the Stone* (1984) and the fantasy/romance *The Princess Bride* (1987). Generic purity, of course, is a fallacy, and many of the films in this study most likely do include elements of other genres, particularly the workplace or ensemble comedy. I have chosen, however, to

focus on those texts in which sexual relationships are most clearly the narrative and generic focus.

This project will draw and expand on existing studies on romance and romantic comedy. Critics such as Frank Krutnik, Steve Neale, and Mark D. Rubinfeld have produced illuminating work on the contemporary romance. Krutnick and Neale (Krutnik 1990, Neale and Krutnik 1990, Neale 1992) have traced a trajectory of the post-studio era romance, from the sex/seduction comedies of the 1950s and 1960s, through the impossibility of romance in the early 70s and the “nervous” romance of the late 1970s, through the “new romance” that emerges in the 1980s. For both critics the shifts in the genre reflect “a process of modification in accord with the shifting cultural environment” (Krutnik 1990, 62). Krutnik sees the ‘nervous romance’ as an attempt to “[reconcile] the lure of ‘old-fashioned’ heterosexual love with the problems seen to jeopardize it since the 1960s” (63). In a subsequent essay, Neale traces this attempt through to the direct return of old-fashioned love in the “new romance” of the 1980s and 90s. Krutnik and Neale provide a useful guide to the development of contemporary romantic comedy, and they are right to connect this development to changes in the larger (sexual) culture. I wish, however, to focus even more directly on the interaction between popular film texts and moment in which they are produced and consumed. More specifically, I will explore how contemporary romantic comedy speaks to female spectators about these larger cultural shifts.

In addition to the work of Neale and Krutnik, Mark Rubinfeld’s in *Bound To Bond: Gender, Genre and the Romantic Comedy* (2001) provides many interesting insights into the genre, particularly the sexist ideology of many of its basic narratives. Rubinfeld’s

study is based primarily around what he sees as “The four Hollywood love stories”—Pursuit, Redemption, the Foil, and Permission. In his reading of these plots and their related themes, Rubinfeld argues that romantic comedies “are essentially stories of masculinity and femininity with roles and rules that ensure femininity is subordinated to masculinity” (xv). Rubinfeld’s critique of the genre’s conservative ideology is certainly valid, and similar criticisms have been made by other theorists, including Neale. Indeed, part of my task here will be to expose romantic comedy’s patriarchal underpinnings. I will also, however, explore the possibilities of readings beyond the “feminine subordination” scenario with which Rubinfeld is principally concerned. Like Modleski and Radway, I see romantic comedy and its relationship to the women who watch it as “complicated and contradictory” (Radway 221). While these films may ostensibly attempt to reinforce the patriarchal status quo, I will examine the other, less constrictive pleasures and positions they offer their female viewers.

In addition to these studies, *Terms of Endearment*, edited by Peter William Evans and Celestine Deleyto, provides a selection of essays on 1980s and 1990s romantic comedies. The goal of this collection, according to its editors, is to address the “cultural variations [which] have been incorporated into the genre” and the genre’s “resilience” and “ability to adapt to historical change” (Evans and Deleyto 3). This anthology expands the scope of romantic comedy criticism to include independent films like Allison Anders’s *Gas Food Lodging* and Spike Lee’s *Jungle Fever*, and more offbeat romances like Woody Allen’s *Alice*. The essays in this anthology are quite useful, particularly as they move the discussion of romantic comedy outside the borders of the genre’s often white, middle-class heterosexual world. Most of the articles, however, focus more on

analysis and description of the texts themselves than on the possible ways they might address their spectators, especially female spectators of the historical moment around which this collection is organized. In her analysis of *Working Girl*, for example, Chantal Cornut-Gentile very clearly places the film within the “yuppie” world of the Reagan 1980s, and she identifies the many ways the film works to constrain its female protagonist(s). However, this essay, like others in the collection, still leaves room for a discussion of the operations these films perform on the women who watch them. While I will examine some of the same issues raised in these essays, I will be more specifically concerned with issues of spectatorship, particularly the intersection of historical moment and spectator position.

I will also expand on the work of Radway and Modleski by examining romance viewing in its specific cultural context. Both critics make compelling points about the complexity of popular feminine texts for women and the contradictory ways women interact with them, and their findings will provide the starting point for much of my discussion of contemporary romantic comedy. Neither author, however, really foregrounds these texts as products of a particular historical or cultural moment. In *Loving With a Vengeance*, Modleski traces and “admittedly overschematized lineage” of the Harlequin Romance from the 18<sup>th</sup> century sentimental novel through the domestic novel of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and sketches the long history of the gothic novel from its beginnings in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to its contemporary form (15). Yet, in both of these trajectories, she presents the desires and anxieties these texts address as relatively constant and unchanging. (In *Feminism Without Women*, Modleski situates her readings more specifically within the historical moment of postfeminism. This book, however,

covers a wide range of popular texts, not just those aimed at women.) Similarly, Radway suggests that romance readers “seem to be struggling with the promise and threat of the women’s movement” (78). Yet, after making this statement, Radway continues to present the struggle in general terms rather than exploring the specific implications of the feminist movement for contemporary romance readers. Though women continue to be oppressed under patriarchy, this oppression—and even patriarchy itself—take different forms at different historical moments. The work of Radway and Modleski has been invaluable in providing a more sophisticated understanding of popular female texts. Their insights could be further illuminated, however, when we understand the desires and fears they have revealed as products of women’s position in a specific period in history.

The remainder of this study is organized around examinations of specific sets of romantic comedies, the first two chapters grouped by stars, the final two by the narrative or cultural shifts they represent. In the following chapter, I examine the romantic comedies starring Meg Ryan. Using the work of Neale, Jessica Benjamin, Richard Dyer and others, I discuss how Ryan’s films and her persona speak to women’s very real anxieties about turn-of-the-millennium sexuality. The “old-fashionedness” of many of the Meg Ryan romances can be read as a response to the uncertainties of adult relationships in the 1980s and 90s—a desire to return to the stability and security of traditional gender relationships. Though these films do contain conservative or regressive elements, I argue that they express more than a simple nostalgia for the traditional romance. They also offer something more comforting to a (female) audience attempting to navigate the treacherous terrain of contemporary sexuality. They present a possibility of sexual relationships based, not on the dominance and submission model of

patriarchal gender roles, but on notions of equality, recognition, and even exchange between partners. “Meg Ryan” embodies a whole set of contradictions—maternal/childlike, feminine/androgynous, sexually attractive/sexually innocent—which have been noted by a number of critics. I contend, however, that these contradictions allow her to both conform to traditional patriarchal ideals of adult feminine sexuality and to open up possibilities of longing—romantic or otherwise—that are organized, not according to the Law of the Father, but according to the relationship with the Mother.

In contrast to Meg Ryan’s wholesome, “old-fashioned” romantic persona, Julia Roberts’s romantic presence is decidedly more contemporary and more overtly sexualized. I begin my chapter on the Roberts films by exploring the ways she is presented as both eroticized spectacle and as eternal feminine mystery in many of her films. In many ways, Roberts’s films exhibit an attempt to re-contain modern female sexuality by an objectifying of the woman that is reminiscent of Classical Hollywood. In this chapter I employ the theories of feminist critics like Laura Mulvey to illuminate the patriarchal ideologies that structure the Roberts films. I also argue, however, that though the Roberts comedies on one level construct their star and their central romantic relationships according to traditional ideas of gender and femininity, they are not simply patriarchally-structured texts. Along with the romance narrative, they offer notions of a larger community and of alternatives to heterosexual romance that reflect the culture’s shifting definitions of romance and sexuality. They also self-consciously announce themselves as fantasy, wish-fulfillment, or parody of the Hollywood romance. It is this very constructedness that allows the (female) viewer to both invest emotionally in these films and to question their more traditional assumptions.



In next chapter I examine the issue of race and ethnicity in contemporary romantic comedy from several points of entry. First, using the work of critics such as Ed Guerrero, I examine the romantic comedies featuring African-American characters that began to emerge in the early 1990s, particularly these films' reliance on assimilationist fantasies of race, class position and sexuality. I then look at the second wave of Black romantic comedies that began appearing near the end of the decade, such as *Love Jones* and *Brown Sugar*. Using Gladstone Yearwood's notion of Afrocentric film criticism, I argue that these films deliberately foreground African-American cultural investment and production to transform a historically white genre and allow it to speak for a specifically Black experience. I am particularly interested in the way these films make use of and transform the traditions of "white" romantic comedy, both directly, as in *Brown Sugar's* narrative and stylistic similarities to *When Harry Met Sally . . .*, and indirectly, as in *Love Jones's* more oblique references to Hollywood romances. The main question throughout this chapter will be how issues of pleasure and spectatorship intersect issues of race and gender. I will ask whether the "Black" romance offers the African-American viewer more opportunities for identification and pleasure than the "white" texts. Using the work of bell hooks and other critics, I will explore the positions romantic comedy constructs for the spectator of color—more specifically, I will ask what potential these films' construction of Black female sexuality hold for women spectators.

The final chapter will examine the ways romantic comedy has evolved in the past decade. The popularity of Helen Fielding's 1996 comic novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* helped launch a whole body of "lovably-helpless-career-girl in search of Mr. Right" films, television, and popular literature—texts I will refer to as "chick flicks (or movies)"

and “chick lit (or novels”). In this section I will analyze the emergence of what I will call “chick culture” and the ways it both builds on and departs from both more traditional contemporary romantic comedies and from earlier popular forms produced specifically for women, such as the romance novel and the woman’s film. I am particularly interested in the ways that the romantic narrative in these texts often supports or is secondary to the primary story of female self-discovery and empowerment. Within this trend I will also examine the importance of female friendship and the “urban family,” particularly in the case of the Bridget Jones narratives and *Sex and the City*. Like the Julia Roberts films, these texts reflect the culture’s ongoing redefinition of terms like “family” and “relationship.” In doing so, they offer women readers and viewers, many of whom may identify with the texts’ single heroines, alternatives to the increasingly uncertain—and perhaps unrealistic—ideal of the two-parent, two-child nuclear family. Though these texts still primarily operate within the same traditional parameters as earlier romances, I will contend that they present possibilities for new forms of female agency and pleasure within a traditionally conservative genre.

The position of any critic who sets out to examine a set of texts in which she has a personal investment is at best a precarious one. This is, perhaps, the particular case for a feminist critic examining popular forms aimed at women. As critics like Doane and Modleski have pointed out, women’s relationship to popular forms has traditionally been portrayed as one of absorption and over-identification. The critic, by virtue of studying a particular form, risks the appearance of setting herself above or outside the fascinations that have ensnared “regular” women. On the other hand, if she is not critical enough in her examination of these forms, she stands an equal risk of appearing to be yet another

woman duped by mass culture. The critic, then, should be aware of her own susceptibility even as she seeks to learn how mass culture exploits that susceptibility. As Modleski notes:

It seemed important at one historical moment to emphasize the way 'the people' resist mass culture's manipulations. Today, we are in danger of forgetting the crucial fact that like the rest of the world even the cultural analyst may sometimes be a 'cultural dupe'—which is, after all, only an ugly way of saying that we exist inside ideology, that we are all victims, down to the very depths of our psyches, of political and cultural domination (even though we are never *only* victims).  
(*Feminism* 45)

Modleski calls for a feminist practice in which the critic "recognizes her commonality with other women" and performs her work as a "gift" or "symbolic exchange" with the women to and for whom she works and writes. It is in that spirit that I have embarked on this study (*Feminism* 45, 46).

I came to this project by wanting to understand how romantic comedies could continue to act on my own fantasies and desires, even as I realized how regressive their narratives and constructions of female identity can be. Romantic comedy has long been my "drug of choice." I still cry at the end of *Sleepless in Seattle*, even as I wonder how Tom Hank's son *really* is going to like having a new stepmother. If I'm lonely, or bored, or stressed, I find comfort in yet another viewing of *Bridget Jones's Diary*. My own relationship to these texts led me to ask what reading and viewing positions they offer the women who engage with them. I have a lot at stake in defending these films, and part of me hesitates to submit texts to which I am so emotionally attached to critical scrutiny. I also understand that the pleasures and problems I find in romantic comedies may not be those encountered by all spectators. I do not seek to speak for all women. Rather, I want to explore the multitudes of positions romantic comedy offers its female viewers. Laura Mulvey once proclaimed that she intended to destroy pleasure by analyzing it. That is

not my intent here. I wish to examine these texts and their relationship to those of us who invest in them in all their complexity. Rather than destroying pleasure, I wish to understand it more fully.

CHAPTER 1  
MANHATTAN AND THE MATERNAL:  
THE MEG RYAN ROMANTIC COMEDIES

She was insulting and provocative and the only thing pleasant about her was the way her hair fell across her forehead.

--Joe Fox (Tom Hanks), *You've Got Mail*

No actress has become as closely associated with contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy as Meg Ryan. Since the late 1980s, Ryan has crafted the persona of the wholesome, slightly goofy "girl-next-door" in *You've Got Mail* (1998) and in other films which would seem to fit neatly within Steve Neale's category of the "New Romance," a "cycle of romantic comedies" beginning in the 1980s that marked a return to the "markedly—and knowingly 'old-fashioned'" Hollywood romantic tradition. Indeed, as I discuss in the introduction to this project, the "old-fashioned-ness" of many contemporary romances, particularly those starring Meg Ryan, can be read as a response to the uncertainties of adult sexual relationships in the 1980s and 90s—a desire to return to the stability and security of traditional gender roles and relationships. However, though these films do contain conservative or regressive elements, I will argue that they express more than a simple nostalgia for the traditional romance. The Meg Ryan romantic comedies also offer something more comforting to an audience attempting to navigate the treacherous terrain of contemporary sexuality. They present the seeds of an alternative possibility of sexual relationships based, not the phallogentric model of (masculine) dominance and (feminine) submission, but on notions of equality, recognition, and even exchange between partners that are often based in the importance of the primary maternal

relationship rather than patriarchal constructions of sexual development based on Freud's Oedipal model.

To categorize the films I will discuss in this chapter as the "Meg Ryan" romantic comedies is, on a certain level, to ascribe a sort of authorship to the star of a series of films. While I do not contend that Meg Ryan has an active creative role in her romantic comedies (one can assume, however, that she has developed some sort of collaborative relationship with Nora Ephron in the movies they have made together) there is a sense in which the Meg Ryan persona is the organizing force of these films. Richard Dyer remarks that a group of "star vehicles" can take on the characteristics of a genre, developing its own "continuities of iconography . . . visual style . . . and structure" (*Stars* 62). The romantic comedies starring Meg Ryan share a number of these continuities: They often follow a similar narrative structure (sweet, yet neurotic career woman falls in love with equally neurotic, unthreateningly attractive man), similar settings (mostly urban areas, and, more often than not, Manhattan), and the same nostalgic, almost innocent tone.

Perhaps the most common element of the Ryan comedies is the consistent iconography of Ryan herself. She has often been called "America's Sweetheart," and has been dubbed both "America's Perky Princess" and "a national icon of wholesomeness" by *People* magazine (Schneider 104, "Meg On Her Own"). Although this image has been both supported and complicated by the discourse surrounding Ryan's "real" persona (which I discuss below), it is largely a function of the way her filmic characters are constructed—and the way this construction is reinforced by the attendant publicity surrounding any particular film. A *People* article coinciding with the release of *You've*

*Got Mail* paints the construction of Ryan's onscreen persona as a process in which the actress willingly participates: "Ryan (and the studio execs who paid her a reported 10.5 million for *Mail*) understands what moviegoers want from her: pleated skirts and sweater sets, a few petulant pouts and a happy ending" (Schneider 104). These "petulant pouts," along with Ryan's much-commented upon habit of wrinkling her nose during moments in which she's being particularly "cute" or "perky," are a vital part of the "Meg Ryan" with whom most moviegoers are familiar. Dyer notes that "the repertoire of gestures, intonations, etc. that a star establishes over a number of films carries the meaning of his/her image just as much as the inert element of appearance, the particular sound of his/her voice or dress style" (*Stars* 142).

Coupled with her wholesome blue-eyed blonde beauty, this array of "cute" gestures works to produce a film image of—at least on the surface—sweetness and (sexual) innocence that particularly addresses the sexual climate in which it has been constructed. Peter William Evans calls Ryan the "safe-sex alternative" romantic comedy heroine (193). She not only allows spectators to experience the "securities of the past" and "brings back the future of monogamous marriages and fidelities," but also, in her interactions with her male counterparts, she is "not castrating but 'challenging'" (Evans 199, 206). In her romantic comedies, this sexual innocence is conveyed not only narratively (her characters are rarely shown in sexualized situations, and when they are, as in *When Harry Met Sally* . . . (1989), the sexual experience is with the man the film has already presented as her soul mate), but in the visual image of Ryan on the screen. In almost all of her romances, Ryan is photographed in way that plays up her blonde hair, clear blue eyes and makes her fair skin appear nearly flawless. In moments of intense

emotion, she is often shot close-up, the soft focus and back-lighting making her look not only “pure,” but almost angelic. These moments clearly present her as a woman who would engage in promiscuous sexuality or subject herself to the threat of AIDS or an unwanted pregnancy. She nearly always represents the woman who not only willingly takes her appointed place in a heterosexual romance, but actively seeks the lover/patriarchal stand-in that will put her that place.

The sexual innocence connoted by Ryan’s blonde whiteness is also connected to notions of racial purity. Dyer notes that “blondness . . . is the ultimate sign of whiteness . . . [it is] racially unambiguous” (*Heavenly Bodies* 43). As a figure of white womanhood, Ryan becomes, in Mary Ann Doane’s words, “symbolic of all that the white men struggle to safeguard—white purity, white culture, whiteness itself” (*Femmes Fatales* 230). The notion of Ryan as a space in which sexual and racial purity intersect is reinforced by the fact that, just as her romantic comedy characters rarely act in an overtly sexual manner, they also never interact with people of color, especially black men. *You’ve Got Mail*, for example, is the only Meg Ryan romantic comedy to feature a black actor—Dave Chappelle as a friend and co-worker of Tom Hanks’s character. Yet, Chappelle never appears in the same shot with Ryan; in the only scene in which their characters are supposed to be in the same space, he must look at her through a window from afar.<sup>1</sup> The notion of the onscreen Ryan as a figure that must be preserved from racial or sexual contamination contributes to the conservative, nostalgic overtones of many of her film romances, particularly in light of the fact that these films emerged in an age of

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<sup>1</sup> Until the late 1990s, the romantic comedy was almost exclusively the terrain of white actors. The genre’s nearly all-white history will be an important point in Chapter Three.



(ostensible) multiculturalism and racial equality. However, this persona and the films that have helped to construct it are more complex than they might first appear.

Indeed, the way the details of appearance and array of gestures that make up Ryan's screen image are mobilized, particularly in her later films, points to the very constructedness of that image and the idea of "healthy good-girl sweetness and light" it is meant to signify (Evans 206). The wrinkled nose, crinkled eyes and tousled blonde hair have been repeated in most of the Ryan romantic comedies to the point where they become mere components in the Ryan persona, trotted out once again for the audience's reassurance and enjoyment. One could argue, in fact, that in more recent romantic comedies like *You've Got Mail* Ryan is purposely playing the Meg Ryan Character as a collection of expected expressions, movements and commodified blue-eyed bloneness. In *Mail*, Ryan runs through her whole set of patented grins, gasps and coltish movements, while all the while, as Tom Hank's character notes, "her hair falls [attractively] across her forehead." Whether a result of the industry's practice of running successful formulae into the ground, lazy acting habits, or Ryan's conscious choice, the "Meg Ryan-ness" of these performances ultimately is so heightened that they are open to reading for constructedness and performativity, and thus become a means of interrogating the conservative representations of feminine sexuality of which they are a part. The repetitiveness and obvious constructedness of the Meg Ryan screen image can be read—by the spectator who chooses to do so—as a masquerade, a form of femininity that can be taken off (and its constraints rejected) as well as put on. Such a reading would resonate most clearly in a culture where ideas of femininity are constantly being redefined, even as

the pressure to maintain them (a pressure in which the Ryan romances admittedly participate in applying, at least on one level) intensifies.

While the Ryan screen persona (no matter how obviously constructed) is ostensibly one of wholesome sweetness, it is still shaded by what Dyer calls a "structured polysemy," or "the multiplicity of meanings and affects [stars] embody" (*Stars* 3). The Ryan screen persona often experiences eruptions of the "edginess and darkness" that surround her—elements that must be repressed in the production of the "good girl" image (Williams 206). Williams mentions overt examples of such eruptions, such as the confrontation with the concierge in *French Kiss* (1995) (an additional example is the resounding slap and "fuck you!" Sally unleashes on Harry near the end of *When Harry Met Sally . . .*). While these instances of acting out are telling, more subtle, less direct examples also exist in the Ryan comedies—again, in those very elements that make up the Ryan image. Ryan's performances are often marked by exaggerated physical movements that are performed ostensibly for comic effect. *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), for example, features a scene of Ryan frantically running around her kitchen in the middle of the night, arms flailing and bathrobe flapping, as she attempts to listen to a call-in radio show and phone a friend without being discovered by her fiancé. Like other similar moments in the Ryan comedies, this scene is played for laughs. Read another way, however, these broad comic gestures represent the expenditure of a repressed energy that cannot be expelled in any other way. Just as the overly-stylized mise-en-scène of melodrama often expresses what cannot be said outright, so Meg Ryan's exaggerated physical performances give vent to repressed desires and fears—sexual or

otherwise—that would be unseemly coming from the mouth of a romantic comedy heroine known for innocent sweetness.<sup>2</sup>

What, then, are some of the repressed anxieties and longings that return in the performance of Meg Ryan's screen persona? Read within its historical moment, "Meg Ryan" the film creation can be seen in general terms as a persona that responds to the upheavals of late 20<sup>th</sup> century culture, particularly as it concerns that culture's constructions of femininity. She is a figure of intense nostalgic longing for a simpler sexual climate, but in her this nostalgia is always in tension with the desire to break away from the constraints on both sexual freedom and female agency that helped keep order in that simpler time. Her character in *When Harry Met Sally* may express a wish to be the ornamental "First Lady of Czechoslovakia," but her soul-mate ends up being a man with whom she can enjoy equality and sexual fulfillment. The Ryan character is also the emblem of "safe sex" and romance free from the fear of disease and the other dangers attached to modern sexuality, but those fears are only partly repressed and always lurk in the shadows around her. In *Sleepless* she may be the "image of [feminine] perfection," but these days, as Tom Hank's character warns his son, she could just as easily be the knife-wielding, bunny-slaughtering psycho from *Fatal Attraction* (Evans 197). In short, she is the expression of many of the contradictions experienced by her (female, at least sometimes single) contemporary viewers as they attempt to negotiate a post-sexual revolution, post-AIDS sexual landscape.

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<sup>2</sup> The discussion of Ryan's exaggerated physical gestures also brings to mind psychoanalytic work on female hysterics. In her introduction to *Freud on Women*, a collection of Freud's essays on feminine sexuality, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl writes that for the hysteric, "desire dammed up seeks a substitute outlet in symptoms." She adds that "Freud looked at hysterical symptoms as though they were . . . clues to lost cultures—to the unconscious mind, the domain of repressed desires and experiences" (5). In this sense, Meg Ryan's is a hysterical body that must be "decoded" in order to discover the repressed desires (or anxieties) it attempts to express.

Because star personae are produced through the interaction of numerous texts, it is often difficult to separate the filmic persona from the (equally constructed) public persona of the "real" star. (I have, in fact, encountered such a difficulty in organizing this discussion.) Dyer sees the construction of a star image as a synergistic process in which "the roles and/or performance of a star in a film [are] taken as revealing the personality of the star (which is corroborated by the stories in the magazines, etc.)" (*Stars* 20). This conflation works as much in the case of Meg Ryan as it does of any other star. Indeed, when colleagues describe her in the popular press, it is often difficult to discern whether they are speaking of the "real" Ryan or one of her film characters. In a 1995 profile, *French Kiss* director Lawrence Kasdan, speaking of Ryan the woman, ticks off a number of qualities that have come to be expected in any Ryan film heroine: "[She is] adorable, huggable, smart, funny, strong." In the same article, writer/director Nora Ephron, who has worked with Ryan four times, sums up the non-threatening appeal of both Ryan and her romantic comedy incarnations: "Men want to be married to her, women want to be her friends . . . women somehow don't mind if their boyfriends like Meg because they like her too" ("Star Lite," 79).

However, though the publicity surrounding Ryan actively works to preserve the cute, perky image presented in her romances, there is also a concerted effort to differentiate the fluffy characters from the ostensibly more complex actress. In a 1993 *Vogue* profile, a colleague is quoted as claiming that Ryan "can tap into stuff that's very dark," and that she's "not Sally [the perky, neurotic title character in *When Harry Met Sally* . . .] by any stretch of the imagination" (Kalogerakis 269). An article in *People* published several years later states that Ryan is "not exactly thrilled with the 'perky'

thing,” and that she’s “looking for ways of saying that the Girl Next Door has moved out” (Schneider 104). Even Ryan herself notes that her perky image may be wearing thin with moviegoers. “I don’t want to play a twenty-year-old ingenue any more,” she states in a 2003 *InStyle* interview, “and no one wants to see me do that” (Schneller 438). The attempt to break away from the “Girl Next Door” image has led Ryan to try “grittier” roles, such as the alcoholic wife and mother in *When a Man Loves a Woman*, and, more recently, the tough-talking, provocatively-dressed boxing manager in *Against the Ropes*, with varying degrees of success. Certainly the move to shade or complicate Ryan’s image, both onscreen and off, is at least in part a commercial one. After all, no working actor wants to be typecast and limit his or her employment. This is especially true of actresses in romantic comedy, a genre that, because it requires young, attractive female leads, offers increasingly fewer roles to actresses as they age.<sup>3</sup> However, these attempts also serve to complicate a reading of her as simply a figure of what Evans calls “virginal good daughterness, with the potential for good wife and motherness” (200).

Evans’s assessment of Ryan, however, was written before the events that provided a jarring shift to Ryan’s public persona: the end of her seemingly idyllic 10-year marriage to Dennis Quaid and her reputed affair with Russell Crowe in 2000. Publicity surrounding the break-up made use of many of the same terms that have always been attached to Ryan, but with a twist. One headline proclaims, “Sweethearts Sour: Meg Ryan and Dennis Quaid’s split stuns family and friends—as does her closeness to Russell Crowe,” while another article on the split declares, “One of Hollywood’s favorite all-

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<sup>3</sup> Such is not the case, however, for male actors in romantic comedies. Harrison Ford, Al Pacino and Richard Gere have all starred in romantic comedies well after the age of forty, and often with actresses who are anywhere from fifteen to twenty-five years younger.

American couples is over" ("Sweethearts Sour" 82, "Ryan's Fancy" 54). In the attendant publicity over the break-up, Ryan's good-girl persona also came into question, as clichés of fallen-womanhood replaced clichés of wholesome femininity. *Time* reported that "the all-American blond is now a Jezebel," while a *People* article on the scandal stated that "a sweetheart no longer, Ryan suddenly felt . . . like the 'scarlet woman'" ("Forget About the Illicit Tryst" 103, "Meg Ryan" 60).

Although it is nearly impossible to determine reasons spectators will or won't see a particular film, the publicity over Ryan's private life most likely had an effect on the box office results of *Kate & Leopold* (2001), the first Ryan romantic comedy released after her divorce and alleged affair. *Kate & Leopold* brought in just over \$47 million in the U.S. market, compared with the \$126 million *Sleepless in Seattle* earned nearly ten years earlier. While this fall-off can be attributed to a number of factors (including a growing feeling that Ryan has dipped into the well of "cute" romantic comedy too many times), I would contend that at least part of the film's lukewarm critical and commercial reception was due to the emerging dissonance of Ryan's public and film images. For years, the image of Ryan as the actress committed to her marriage and child harmonized nicely with the wholesome, monogamy-bound characters she played in her romantic comedies. This harmony was disrupted when her less-than-perfect personal life became a prominent factor in the publicity surrounding her. Because Ryan's image as a happy wife and mother fed her wholesome romantic comedy heroine persona (and vice-versa), the shift in the former made it difficult to completely accept her as the later.

When the "realities" of Ryan's life made it more difficult to accept her as the innocent heroine, however, the discourses surrounding Ryan the actress began to craft yet

another persona for her—the single working mother making a life for herself. A *People* magazine article published the year after Ryan's marital difficulties depicts a Meg Ryan "on her own . . . celebrat[ing] a new freedom" ("On Her Own" 86). A month later, *People* cast Ryan as a figure intended to resonate with many of the viewers of her romantic comedies: the single woman looking for love. The headline "What Money Can't Buy: They Seem to Have It All, But Julia Roberts, Meg Ryan and Nicole Kidman Struggle to Find the Right Script for Romance" foregrounds these women's position both as movie stars (often in romances) and as newly single women (76). A passage in the article clarifies the connection between the recently divorced Ryan and the single female viewers who may identify with her romantic comedy alter-egos: "While power, money and sex appeal are a powerful quartet, they don't always lead to romantic harmony," the authors proclaim. And though it might be hard, in a world full of lonely hearts, to feel sympathy for a superstars who just made life more difficult for everyone else, things are tough all over" (76).

Though it may be a bit amusing, the idea of Meg Ryan as a "lonely heart" competing with a lot of other single women for the few available men out there would at first seem as regressive as some of her film romances appear to be. As Dyer points out, publicity about stars' romantic troubles often serves as a discourse about marriage. "What these articles are really doing," he writes, "is endlessly raking over the problems posed by notions of romance and passion within the institution of compulsory monogamy" (*Stars* 46). Moreover, the image of Meg Ryan as a single woman looking for love is part of a larger network of discourses that emerged at the turn of the millennium aimed at single women looking to marry, from self-help books like Ellen

Fein and Sherrie Schneider's *The Rules* (1995) and Laura Doyle's *The Surrendered Single* (2002) to television shows like ABC's *The Bachelor*. Yet, the popular construction of "divorced single mother" Meg Ryan also lends itself to an arguably more progressive reading. By endlessly analyzing these problems, the publicity about (female) celebrities' relationship difficulties provides an arena for a larger discussion about such issues as sex, marriage and monogamy. Within such an arena, a space can be created for questioning, and perhaps beginning to change, the assumptions on which such issues have been negotiated in the past.

The attempt to add darker layers to Ryan's wholesome film persona (while not always completely successful), coupled with the edgier aspects of the "real-life" actress, make Ryan, like the romantic comedies in which she stars, more complex than she first appears. Dyer argues that "star images function crucially in relation to contradictions within and between ideologies, which they seek variously to 'manage' or resolve," particularly in "those moments when hegemony is not, or is only uneasily, secured" (*Stars* 34, 3). As an affirmation of what Evans, quoted above, calls "good daughterness" and "good wife and motherness," Meg Ryan's on- and off-screen personae seem to offer the perfect nostalgic alternative to decades of sexual upheaval, changing gender roles, and to borrow Kathleen Rowe's phrase, "unruly women." As a "figure of identification" for modern women, the Ryan image invites spectators to forsake the uncertainties of women's place in millennial culture and to return to the comforts of traditional feminine roles. This facet of Ryan's persona has certainly been the most prevalent, and is probably enticing to contemporary women exhausted by the struggle to make sense of an ever-changing world. However, the other side to Ryan's image—the character who does not



docilely accept her designated role in patriarchal culture but acts out (however subtly) against its constrictions, the “real-life” single mother struggling to raise her son and make sense of relationships even as she embraces the freedom of a life outside terms like “marriage” and “wife”—are equally open to identification by women undergoing similar experiences. The contradictions in the Ryan image, her straddling of the divide between traditional/conservative and modern/progressive, make her a figure through which the spectator can work through her own desires and anxieties about her place in the modern landscape. These same contradictions are explored, not only through the Ryan persona, but also in the romantic comedies that have helped produce it.

The narratives of the romantic comedies in which Ryan has starred are often quite conservative, and it would be natural to object to these films’ conventional overtones, particularly if one is concerned with their possible impact on the women who watch them. Like many popular romantic texts, they construct a position for their female spectators from which they may more easily absorb the films’ representations of a woman’s place under patriarchy. Yet, as I have already argued, to dismiss these movies as simple propaganda for patriarchally-defined sex roles is to miss an opportunity to investigate the other, more progressive operations at work in them. Tania Modleski argues that what she calls “mass-produced fantasies for women” can “reinforce conservative notions of women’s place,” but she also emphasizes the contradictions in these texts and “the complexity of women’s responses” to them (*Wife’s Tales* 56, *Loving* 37). Like Modleski, I see the Meg Ryan romances as complex and contradictory texts. Evans states that the appeal of the Meg Ryan romantic comedies is “attributable to their engagement with the changing needs and desires of their 1980s/1990s female audiences .

... they [both] endorse and problematize in surprising ways the ideology of romantic love in a fashion that clearly connects them with the contradictory tastes of modern audiences" (191). I would add, however, that rather than simply offering the occasional, surprising critique of dominant ideology, they also perform complex operations that resist that ideology. Though they clearly celebrate the values of traditional romance and a woman's position in it, they also present a set of desires that can be read against this tradition. These desires can perhaps best be examined through Jessica Benjamin's concept of intersubjectivity.

Benjamin suggests an alternative to the "traditional sexual complementary," in which "man expresses desire and woman is the object of it." This active/male/subject-passive/female/object dichotomy has led to, in Benjamin's words, "the monopoly of the phallus in representing desire." (86, 88) Under this monopoly, woman "becomes feminine only when she turns from the mother to her father, from activity to passivity" (87). Woman's "renunciation of sexual agency and ... acceptance of object status," argues Benjamin, "are the very hallmark of the feminine" (87). Because "woman has no desire of her own," under such circumstances, Benjamin warns that "she must rely on that of a man, with potentially disastrous consequences for her psychic life" (89). (Such "disastrous consequences are borne out in many Classical Hollywood texts, particularly romantic melodrama and even screwball comedy). Benjamin argues, however, that "this situation is not inevitable." (90).

As an alternative, Benjamin proposes a "return to the concept of intersubjectivity to see how it might lead to a different representation of desire" (125). In contrast to the Oedipally-defined "intrasubjective" relationship, in which "the phallus as emblem of

desire [represents] the meeting of subject and object in a complementarity that idealizes one side and devalues the other," intersubjectivity "refers to experience *between* and *within* individuals . . . it refers to the sense of self and other that evolves through the consciousness that separate minds can share the same feelings and intentions, through mutual recognition." (132, 125). "In getting pleasure with the other and taking pleasure in the other," Benjamin argues, "we engage in mutual recognition" (126).

I am not suggesting that Benjamin's theories can usurp the prevalent oedipally-defined paradigm by which (western) human sexuality operates, or that they necessarily will lead to an appreciable shift in relations between the sexes. They do, however, provide a useful lens through which to read the more progressive aspects of the Meg Ryan romantic comedies. When we view the Meg Ryan films through Benjamin's theories, we can see in them at least a partial vision of the kind of intersubjective relationship Benjamin proposes. The Meg Ryan romances provide female viewers at the turn of the twenty-first century a representation of relationships based on, in Benjamin's words, "simultaneity and equality, not exclusion or privileging of either male or female experiences and capacities" (130). In constructing this new form of romance, these films also suggest the possibility of "a new perspective on woman's desire" (126). Though they do contain elements of traditional, patriarchally-defined sexuality, the relationships in these films are not based solely on the phallogentric model of dominance and submission. They may be engaging in an ostensibly "old-fashioned" romance, but these couples are also working toward the type of intersubjective connection outlined by Benjamin by engaging in equal exchanges and attempts at recognition.

The longing for recognition is acted out literally in *You've Got Mail*. Here, desire must be accompanied by acknowledgment of the other's "true" identity before the protagonists can be united and the narrative can reach its requisite happy ending. The film's intended lovers, Kathleen and Joe (played by Ryan and Tom Hanks), are involved in parallel relationships with each other based on misrecognition and mistaken identities. On one hand, they are anonymous e-mail pals who have fallen in love with each other as they exchange messages on everything from business tactics and lost parents to the existential function of Starbucks. At the same time, however, they know each other as business rivals in "real life." He owns a large chain of bookstores that threatens to—and eventually does—put her small, family owned children's book shop out of business. Though the truth about their identities is revealed to the audience from the film's beginning (and to Hank's character about halfway through the narrative), it is not until both characters reveal themselves to each other that their romance can truly begin.<sup>4</sup>

By proposing a love based in recognition, *You've got Mail* and the other Ryan romances speak to a particular need of their women spectators. Benjamin points out that a female's need for what she calls "identificatory love . . . accompanied by the pleasure of mutual recognition" is often not met in childhood, leaving the girl a sense of "unattainable yearning . . . and self-abasement" (122). As an adult, she will seek what Benjamin calls "ideal love," in which she can assume a passive, submissive position (122). In the Ryan films, the need for identification and recognition are met, allowing the

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<sup>4</sup> The male character's superior knowledge of the "truth" is a plot point in many romantic comedies, including *His Girl Friday*, *Pillow Talk* (1959) and, more recently, *Deliver Us from Eva* (2003). This is certainly one of the genre's more problematic elements, but it could be argued that it is balanced by romantic comedies in which the woman has the upper hand, such as *Bringing Up Baby* or *While You Were Sleeping* (1995).

woman to experience a relationship in which she is able to express her “own agency and desire.”

As active partners in these relationships, the women of the Ryan films possess not only their own desires, but their own voices. Verbal banter plays a large part in many romantic comedies, including the screwball comedies of Classical Hollywood. In films like *The Philadelphia Story*, however, most of the “banter” takes the form of numerous lectures to the “heroine” about her rightful place in the patriarchal structure. Ryan’s characters, on the other hand, are equal participants in each exchange. Indeed, one of the great pleasures of these films (particularly those written by Nora Ephron) is the witty repartee the couple engage in on the way to falling in love. In *When Harry Met Sally . . .*, for example, the romance develops almost completely around the two leads’ amusing banter. In their first encounter, Sally (Ryan) and Harry (Billy Crystal) spend a car trip from Chicago to New York debating, among other things, the merits of Humphrey Bogart over “the other guy” in *Casablanca* and the possibility that men and women can ever be “just friends.” As the film progresses, the two build their friendship through late night phone conversations and post-mortems on their respective love lives. Their comfort with each other and their verbal compatibility becomes so strong that they can even engage each other in linguistic games, as in the scene in which they try on new accents while playing with words like “pepper” and “pecan pie.” Their verbal give-and-take does more than signify their “rightness” for each other. It also presents a romance between two articulate, witty adults, not a relationship based on one partner’s desire for or domination over the other. Both parties in these skirmishes give as good as they get as they work toward a recognition of the other.

It is not only through plot and dialogue, however, that the Ryan comedies model the notions of equality and recognition central to Benjamin's notions of intersubjectivity. The narrative structure of these films also often conveys a relationship based on identification and even exchange. The three Ryan films written or directed by Nora Ephron, *When Harry Met Sally . . .*, *Sleepless in Seattle*, and *You've Got Mail* all very consciously balance their narratives between the two protagonists. They often employ a pattern of alternating scenes—or even shots—between the hero and heroine to position both characters as active subjects of the story. *You've Got Mail*, for example, opens with a sequence that cuts between Kathleen and Joe as they begin the day in their respective apartments. The shots convey each character's living space and personality, and introduce the "wrong partners" to be eliminated before the film's end: Shots of the sweet, girlish Kathleen listening to a lecture from her technophobe boyfriend in her sun-filled, feminine apartment are intercut with a similar scene with Joe and his high-strung girlfriend in Joe's more streamlined, ostensibly more masculine kitchen. Accompanying these shots are voice-overs by Ryan and Hanks in the form of e-mails exchanged between their characters that convey the nature of their cyber-relationship. This sequence establishes both Joe and Kathleen as equal participants in the narrative to come, rather than setting up one as the active protagonist and the other as the object of desire to be discovered at some point in the film.

Editing strategies become even more crucial in *Sleepless in Seattle*, perhaps the first romantic comedy in which the intended lovers do not even meet until the movie is almost over. The couple spends so much screen time apart that the editing must convey the notions of balance and recognition that make up the intersubjective relationship. At

several points during the film, a shot of either Sam or Annie beginning one action immediately cuts to the other completing a similar action. For example, as Annie leaves her brother's office after confessing her infatuation with Sam, the film cuts from a shot of her walking through the office door to a shot of Sam emerging from another door, creating a sense that the two are simultaneously engaged in the same activity. Such moments establish the romantic possibilities—and the sense of intersubjective connection—between the two characters without them even exchanging a line of dialogue. Moments like those in *Sleepless* and *Mail* also enhance the pleasure already inherent in following the romance to its happy conclusion. The narrative establishes that two characters are meant to be together and these structural and visual techniques emphasize the “rightness” of the central couple as they facilitate the viewer's involvement in the lover's journey to the happy ending.

For Benjamin, the idea of “space” is an important aspect of intersubjectivity, and of representing female desire. She suggests that women's desire “can . . . be expressed [in part] as the wish for an open space into which the interior self may emerge” (129). Within this “open space,” woman can experience herself and her own pleasure “freed from . . . idealization and objectification”(129). In many of the Ryan films, this “open space” is constructed in idealized representations of Manhattan as a clean, beautiful, almost magical place in which desires can be expressed and acted on. The New York of *Mail*, for example, is far from images of the dirty, crime-ridden metropolis often associated with popular representations of the city. Rather, it is a sunny village of flower vendors, pretzel stands and other small merchants. This depiction of Manhattan is a deliberate move on the part of writer/director Nora Ephron, who says she sees the city,

not as a large urban area, but as a collection of smaller, old-fashioned neighborhoods (*Mail DVD* director's commentary). Even the construction site Annie runs by on her way to the top of the Empire State Building at the end of *Sleepless in Seattle* sparkles with the promise of New York at night. In these films, New York is presented similarly to Benjamin's description of the "safe transitional space . . . that allows us to feel that our impulses come from within us and so are authentically our own" (128). Like the island of Manhattan, this space "forms a boundary yet opens up to unbounded possibility; it evokes a particular kind of holding, a feeling of safety without confinement" (127).

Once the woman has discovered her self and explored her own desire, she can, in Benjamin's words, "desire to see and recognize her lover" (129). Then this space becomes the "space in between," in which the partners perform what Benjamin calls the "dance of mutual recognition, the meeting of separate selves" (130.) In *Addicted to Love*, this space becomes the abandoned building where Maggie and Sam discover their feelings for each other as they plot revenge on their ex-lovers. In *Kate and Leopold*, it is the townhouse that exists both in Leopold's 19<sup>th</sup> century and in Kate's modern New York, linking them in the same space throughout time. And in *Sleepless in Seattle*, it becomes the observation deck of the Empire State Building, where "magic" brings together two people who live a continent apart<sup>5</sup>. In the end, though, the Meg Ryan films themselves become open spaces in which women can explore their own fantasies and desires. In this space the female viewer can experience the thrill of recognition—of the other she desires, and of herself as a desiring subject.

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<sup>5</sup> The notion of Manhattan as a "safe space" is certainly questionable after the events of September 11, 2001, but the setting now adds an extra layer of meaning to the films. All of the Meg Ryan romantic comedies in this study were produced before 9/11, but for audiences after 9/11 these films can evoke a longing for a time when New York—and, indeed, the world—was at least arguably safer.



Benjamin's suggestion of a relation based on something other than the girl's turn from the passive mother to the active father leads us to the importance of the maternal bond in the Ryan romances. Early in *You've Got Mail*, the first meeting between prospective lovers Kathleen and Joe takes place in Kathleen's bookstore, *The Shop Around the Corner* (a nod to the earlier play and the James Stewart/Margaret Sullavan picture of which this film is a loose remake). The store has been passed to Kathleen from her late mother, and she tells Joe that she will someday pass it on to her own daughter, when she has one. This exchange is significant because it foregrounds the mother/child—and more particularly the mother/daughter—bond in the Meg Ryan romantic comedies and the Ryan character's place in that structure as both daughter seeking a lost maternal object and as a mother or maternal object for others. Though its significance may be lost in the attention directed at the romance—and the Ryan character's ultimate move into a patriarchally-defined heterosexual relationship—the notion of the maternal can be read in Lacanian terms as the force that drives these film's central relationships. In some ways, the lost mother in the Meg Ryan comedies can be seen as a form of the Lacanian Other, that space in which desire is first mapped out. Lacan writes that the initial relationship of the child to its mother is a sort of literalization of the alienation that underlies subjectivity:

It is in the interval between these two signifiers that resides the desire offered by the mapping of the subject in the discourse of the Other, of the first Other he [sic] has to deal with, let us say, by way of illustration, the mother. It is in so far as his desire is beyond or falls short of what she says, of what she hits at, of what she brings out as meaning, in so far as his desire is unknown, it is in this point of lack, that the desire of the subject is constituted. (218-219)

By enacting this gap or lack, the relationship between mother and child motivates and creates a space for the child's desires. Although the subject's first "Other" is not

necessarily the mother, such is often the case in late twentieth-century American society. By structuring the romance around ideas of the maternal, the Ryan comedies propose a more positive, active role for women in sexual relationships as a response (albeit a somewhat idealized, underrealized one) to the issues raised during the women's movement. These films suggest that, rather than masochistically seeking an idealized, dominating male, a woman can form a relationship of equals with a nurturing male partner while still maintaining her initial maternal identification.

Ever since Freud theorized that a girl's path to female (hetero)sexuality involves an (often hostile) termination of the maternal bond in favor of the father as primary object, the relationship of the girl to her mother has been a concern of psychoanalytic theory. In "Femininity," Freud notes that the often hostile reaction of the girl to her mother occurs because "girls hold their mother responsible for their lack of a penis and do not forgive her for their being put at a disadvantage" (353). A number of theorists, however, have placed a different interpretation on the notion of penis envy and its place in the girl's relationship to her mother. Maria Torok, for example, argues that penis envy is the daughter's "pledge of allegiance" to her mother that she will never have satisfaction in the phallus. "The girl speaks to the Mother through her appeal: 'I want that *thing*.' Yet the demand's futility, as regards both its form and substance, implies reassurance toward the Mother. Her prerogatives will remain intact" (47). By continuing her desire for an object that she can never have, the girl ultimately affirms the strength of her tie to the mother who could never provide her with that object.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Later in her essay on penis envy, Torok also will point to the complications the bond with the mother *can* cause the daughter. She argues that as the girl tries to break her connection with the "anal mother," she fixes on the Father, who is also "the Mother's heterosexual object." According to Torok, the "conflict of interest" this situation causes forces the daughter to "renounce her desires" and "turn herself into the

Other theorists have also suggested an arguably more positive view of the daughter's relation to her mother. Nancy Chodorow outlines the significance of the initial mother-daughter bond and the role this bond plays in the girl's future relationships. She argues that "the mother is very important in the daughter and sense of self, such that core psychological and interpersonal experiences for women can be understood in terms of this initial mother-daughter lineage" (viii). This notion leads Chodorow to re-examine the feminine Oedipus complex—at least as it would be played out in a healthy scenario. "The feminine Oedipus complex is not simply a transfer of affection from mother to father and a giving up of the mother," she writes. "Rather, psychoanalytic research demonstrates the continued importance of a girl's external and internal relation to her mother, and the way her relation to her father is *added* to this" (91, *italics added*). The multi-layered structure of the daughter's attachment to both mother and father, according to Chodorow, "entails a relational complexity in feminine self-definition and personality which is not characteristic of masculine self-definition or personality" (91).

Like Chodorow, Benjamin posits the possibility of a more positive relationship between mother and (female) child, even in the child's need for separation from the mother. Benjamin argues that "[an] antagonistic picture [of the child's turning from the mother] obscures the positive side of becoming independent in relationship with the mother—becoming a more active partner in (affectionate) interaction with her (96). This "independent relationship," according to Benjamin, requires a specific type of mother:

She is the holding mother who can support excitement and outside exploration, who can contain both the child's anger and frustration, and survive the storms of assertion and separation. The search for the subject of desire—the ideal father—is

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Mother's anal appendage." This scenario, according to Torok, "explains roughly why [some women] accept a relationship of dependency on men, that is, on the imagoic heirs of the anal mother" (71).

part of a broader search for the constellation that provides not only the missing father but a reconciliation with the mother who acknowledges that desire. (121)

This constellation of holding mother and desired father (figure) is played out in many of the romantic comedies starring Meg Ryan.

One of the Ryan romances that most clearly focuses on the woman's relationship to the (lost) mother is *You've Got Mail*. The connection between Ryan's character, Kathleen, and her late mother can be seen most clearly in the function played by the bookstore that has been passed from mother to daughter. The film marks the shop as a space of connection between Kathleen and her mother in several ways. First, as a children's bookstore it can be read as the safe space of the holding mother of which Benjamin speaks. The feeling of safety is conveyed by the warm tones and lighting and overall coziness of the bookstore set. Scenes in the bookstore are lit in warm, golden tones conveying a sense of both safety and nostalgia for the innocence of childhood. The aged wood surfaces and brown checkerboard tiles of the bookstore set itself echo this nostalgic feel. The warmth of the safety of the bookstore set are evoked even more clearly in the juxtaposition of scenes in this space and those set in the large, stark, brightly-lit set for Fox Books, the corporate, male-dominated conglomerate owned by Tom Hank's character.

The bookstore space itself contains several signifiers of the ongoing bond between mother and daughter theorized by Chodorow. Behind the cash register hangs a picture of Kathleen as a child twirling with her mother. The importance of the photo and of the mother are foregrounded when Hanks, as Joe, comments on the picture and the charm of Kathleen's relationship with her mother. The strongest indication of the continuing connection between Kathleen and her late mother, however, comes at a moment that also

can be read as its termination. As Kathleen is about to leave the store for the last time, having been put out of business by Fox Books, she turns for one final look. A shot of a young Kathleen twirling and laughing with her mother is superimposed over the now empty, darkened store, signifying (it seems) the end of the store and of Kathleen's last tangible tie to her mother.

The conclusion of *You've Got Mail*, in which Kathleen happily unites with the man who has put her out of business (and ostensibly ended the mother/daughter bond) is possibly the most disturbing of any of the Ryan romantic comedies in the way it constricts (or even humiliates) its heroine and, it could be argued, its female spectator(s). While this ending is undeniably problematic, there is another way to theorize the female viewer's possible reaction to it—a theory based on the very mother/daughter bond posited in the film. Linda Williams suggests that the woman's multi-layered, complex relations to both the maternal and the paternal may allow her to see beyond a film's arguably constrictive conclusion. Using Chodorow's notion of female "double identification," Williams argues that the female spectator is particularly well-suited to reading film texts and their conclusions from multiple positions. This is possible, she argues, even in overtly conservative films:

The divided female spectator identifies with the woman whose very triumph is often in her own victimisation, but she also criticizes the price of a transcendent "eradication" which the victim-hero must pay. Thus, although melodrama's [*and, I would argue, romantic comedy's*] impulse toward the just "happy ending" usually places the woman hero in a final position of subordination, the lesson for female audiences is not to become similarly eradicated themselves. (320)

I would add that in romantic comedy, double identification also allows the woman to enjoy the film's pleasurable, romantic aspects, even as she is aware of its problematic tendencies. This is certainly not to suggest that viewers are completely immune to a

film's ideological stance. Williams's theory, however, shows how a female spectator need not be locked into one position while viewing a film—perhaps even less so when the film deals so overtly with the mother/daughter relationship.

The image of Ryan as the daughter in search of the lost maternal figure also resonates strongly with publicity about Ryan's conflicted real-life relationship with her own mother. A 1998 *People* article describes a 15-year-old Ryan looking on tearfully as her mother, Susan Hyra, drove off, "intent on finding a good job before collecting her children" (Schneider 104). Other accounts speak of Hyra leaving the family to pursue an acting career. Ryan never lived with her mother again, and the two remained estranged into Ryan's adulthood. According to the *People* article, the estrangement became a full-fledged break when Hyra angered Ryan by commenting publicly on the drug problems of Ryan's husband, Dennis Quaid. The loss of her own mother, according to accounts of Ryan's relationship with her own son, Jack, has made Ryan determined to give her son "a happy, stable childhood—one she never had" (104). Reports of Ryan's love for her son even extended to the publicity surrounding her divorce, which always stressed that Jack's welfare was a priority for both Ryan and Quaid in any decisions they made about their separation. The image of Ryan as loving mother, just as that of Ryan as motherless daughter, is reinforced by her romantic comedy roles.

While the Ryan character often plays out the daughter's continuing bond with her mother, she just as often embodies some form of the maternal role, whether literal or metaphorical. She does not, however, represent the overbearing, all-consuming mother, nor is she the passive object from which the child turns in favor of the father. Benjamin states that the mother "is rarely regarded as another subject with a purpose apart from her

existence for her child," and that "the mother's lack of subjectivity, as perceived by both male and female children, creates an internal propensity for [female] masochism" (23-24, 81). The way to avoid these problems, according to Benjamin, is to re-conceive the mother as an active, desiring subject. For Benjamin, the "mother who is articulated as a sexual *subject*, one who expresses her own desire," must be part of the "'real' solution to women's desire" and a model for non-masochistic female sexuality and subjectivity. In a number of her romances, the Ryan character signifies this active, desiring mother (figure). This representation, while perhaps overtly traditional, no doubt holds a certain appeal for contemporary viewers trying to forge their own identities as mothers in a climate where the term is a source of contention.

*Sleepless in Seattle* concerns the literal loss of a mother and the Ryan character's function as a replacement for her. Through editing and other techniques, the film stresses that Ryan's Annie is the "right mother" for Jonah, an 8-year old boy who calls a radio show looking for new wife for his father, played by Tom Hanks. Throughout the film, the radio show becomes the object that connects Annie to Jonah and to her future role as his mother. Cross-cutting in the initial call-in sequence establishes Annie's interest in Jonah and his father as the film moves from shots of Jonah and Sam on the phone with the "shrink," to shots of Annie listening and responding to the program. Close-ups on Ryan's face in this sequence foreground her character's emotional involvement in their situation. Editing in a later radio show sequence strengthens the connection between Annie and Jonah. The beginning of the sequence cuts from a shot of Jonah dialing a phone to one of a phone ringing in Annie's apartment. Additionally, during a comic moment later in the sequence, a shot of Jonah screaming is immediately followed by a

shot of a screaming Annie. The two are further linked by the overlap of Jonah's dialogue with Dr. Marsha, the radio shrink, on the soundtrack in this sequence.

Annie's actions within the story also confirm her connection with Jonah and reinforce the idea that she is the right woman to become Jonah's mother. Of all the women who write to Sam after the radio broadcast, she is the only one to write to "Sleepless and Son," signifying her desire to become not only Sam's lover/wife, but also Jonah's mother. Annie's almost psychic link to Jonah is highlighted in the film's final sequence at the Empire State Building. When Annie returns to the deserted observation deck and finds Jonah's backpack, Ryan's expression and body language imply that Annie is so connected to Jonah that she instinctively knows it is his bag. She picks up the bag, notices the Seattle Mariners sticker on its front, and looks around, as if sensing that Jonah has recently been in that space. Just at the moment that Annie pulls Jonah's teddy bear out of the bag (a move Ryan performs as if Annie's hunch has been confirmed), Jonah and Sam return to retrieve the backpack, giving the whole scene a sense of cosmic timing. Annie, Jonah and Sam are united in this scene, and we are left with little doubt that Annie will go on to become Jonah's new mother.

The film's conclusion would again seem to return the female to her traditional role as wife and mother. Yet, there are indications that the maternal role this film envisions for its heroine is closer to Benjamin's idea of the fully active mother-as-subject—and to more contemporary, more progressive ideas of motherhood—than to mother as a passive object or overbearing figure to be escaped. Annie may be portrayed as a flighty woman who simply moves from one man to another, but the film does give her voice and agency. At least half the narrative is presented from Annie's point of view, as seen from



the numerous close-up shots of Ryan/Annie reacting as she watches or listens to Sam and Jonah. Her desires also drive much of the film's narrative action (though we may question the wisdom of those desires for an ostensibly independent modern woman). That Annie is not only an active subject, but also a desiring subject, is conveyed in the scenes of Annie with her fiancé, Walter. Although dialogue states that Annie and Walter share a mature sexual relationship, a sequence set in their bedroom—Annie in a demure flannel nightgown, Walter engaging in an elaborate nightly ritual of tissues, humidifier and allergy medication—suggests that this relationship as anything but erotic. Ryan plays the end of this moment with a restless, dissatisfied expression that foregrounds Annie's unfulfilled desires. Romantic comedy conventions, however, dictate that these desires will be fulfilled in her new relationship with Sam.

The clearest indication that Annie will be the type of maternal subject envisioned by Benjamin can be seen in the contrast between the film's portrayal Annie and of Jonah's late mother, Maggie (Carey Lowell). The film opens after Maggie's death, and the character only appears in two short flashback or fantasy scenes—both of which are from Sam's point-of-view. The first is a flashback of Sam, Maggie and Jonah going to a baseball game in happier times. This flashback consists of one brief shot containing no dialogue. Maggie's second appearance comes in a fantasy/dream in which she appears and speaks to Sam. Though Sam has told Jonah he has "long conversations" with Maggie's spirit, her participation in this particular conversation consists only of a couple of small bits of dialogue, including a line in which *she* asks *him* what she used say when she was alive. Lowell plays Maggie with a compassionate but essentially blank expression, reinforcing the character's status as object. Both of these scenes take place in

Sam's imagination rather than in the "reality" of the film's diegesis, further positioning Maggie as the passive, idealized mother. That the film offers the more fully realized Annie as a replacement for Jonah's mother indicates an attempt to envision the maternal subject suggested by Benjamin. The appeal that this construction of maternity may hold for female spectators attempting to work out their own positions as desiring, active (maternal) subjects in contemporary culture should not be underestimated. As the number of working mothers continues to grow (either out of desire or financial necessity) at the turn of the millennium and popular discourses on women's fulfillment and agency paint traditional roles of wife and mother as either ideal or unattainable and unattractive, Ryan's romantic comedy characters provide images of (potential) motherhood with which their contemporary viewers can identify.

Occasionally, however, the mother/daughter bond can prove overwhelming for the daughter. Julia Kristeva writes that in some cases the daughter will perform an "imaginary capture" of an overbearing mother (79). This assimilation of a maternal that threatens jouissance, according to Kristeva, can lead to depression or frigidity in the daughter. In *French Kiss*, the Ryan character embodies this problematic relationship. Early in the film, Ryan, as Kate, is characterized as a repressed phobic whose problems with her mother are implied rather than overtly stated: She jokes about receiving unsigned birthday cards from her family and persists in calling her fiancé's mother "Mom." While Kate's frigidity is never stated as such, it is clearly symbolized in her fear

of flying (perhaps a reference to the Erica Jong novel)—a fear that provides much of the humor in the film's early sequences.<sup>7</sup>

According to Kristeva, the frigid woman needs a partner who is capable of "[liquefying] the mother imprisoned within [the woman] and giving . . . the major gift [the internalized mother] was never able to offer: a new life" (79). In *French Kiss*, the "life-giving partner" is embodied in Luc (Kevin Kline), the Frenchman Kate meets on a flight to France and with whom she will eventually fall in love. Although Luc initially appears obnoxious and uncouth (as he is the film's male lead, we know that this is just a façade through which Ryan's character must work to find the romantic hero it hides), his qualities as a nurturing, life-giving partner become clear early in the film. Most significantly, he displays an almost instinctive knowledge of Kate's needs. In their first encounter he distracts her from her fear of flying by starting an argument with her during takeoff and getting her drunk during the flight. Throughout the bulk of the film Luc works to help Kate win back her fiancé—helping her dress to attract him, giving pointers on how best to approach him, and distracting his new girlfriend at a crucial moment—even though he has developed feelings for Kate himself. Finally, as the two leads kiss passionately in the fertile, sun-dappled vineyard setting in the film's closing shot, we can also assume that her relationship with Luc has put an end to Kate's implied frigidity.

While Kristeva speaks of the "life-giving" partner specifically within the context of feminine melancholia and depression, her description fits many of the heroes in the Ryan comedies. Indeed, the model of a new type of maternity in the Meg Ryan films is

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<sup>7</sup> I use the term "frigid" understanding that it can sometimes serve to pathologize a form of female sexuality that doesn't fit within the notion of vaginal intercourse and orgasm. In "real life" situations, it can also be used to manipulate women into unwanted sex for fear of seeming cold or somehow abnormal.

accompanied by a shift in the characterizations of the male (or paternal) partner. These men, to use Kristeva's words, "act neither the father's part, ideally rewarding his daughter," nor do they take the part of the "phallic mother" (78-79). The heroes of the Ryan films are not presented, either in casting or in characterization, as overbearing representatives of the patriarchy. The male co-stars in these films, such as Hanks, *When Harry Met Sally* . . . 's Billy Crystal, and Matthew Broderick of *Addicted to Love*, are actors who are known for their non-threatening decency, nebbishy neuroses, or eternal boyishness, respectively. As Evans writes, Hanks, Crystal and Broderick are "characterized both on and off-screen by a comparable almost pubertal, safe and feminized masculinity" (204).

When situated with the history of romantic comedy heroes, most of the male protagonists in the Meg Ryan romances can also be characterized as what Kathleen Rowe calls "melodramatized men" (194). Rowe describes the melodramatic male as a neurotic, anxious "sensitive male" character that begins appearing in comedies of the 1970s. According to Rowe, he "appropriates a suffering or loss more commonly associated with the feminine" (196). The best example of the type in the Ryan comedies is arguably Billy Crystal's portrayal of the morose, death-obsessed Harry in *When Harry Met Sally* . . . . Not only is Harry a direct descendant of Woody Allen's neurotic, intellectual New Yorker persona (which Rowe cites as the most "telling example" of the melodramatized male), but he takes on the suffering and loss usually associated with the feminine. While Ryan's Sally stoically moves past her break-up with a long-term boyfriend, Harry continuously—and often very loudly—mourns the loss of the wife who left him for another man. Rowe argues that the figure of the melodramatized male "reauthorizes male

power” by appropriating “femininity, feminine genres, and feminism itself.” Indeed, to a certain extent the male figures in the Ryan films do appropriate a “feminine” position. The voice-over and flashbacks at the end of *When Harry Met Sally . . .*, for example, are all Harry’s, indicating that the story is in some ways more about his loss and recovery than Sally’s.

If we return to reading these films through psychoanalytic theories of the maternal, however, the lack these men exhibit can be read as a longing for the lost maternal bond—a lack that is ultimately filled by their union with the Ryan heroine. Tom Hank’s family in *You’ve Got Mail*, for example, needs someone to fill the real maternal role—while there are children and three adult men in this family, there are no “mothers” until Kathleen and Joe come together at the end of the film. In *French Kiss*, male lack exists on a number of levels. To begin with, Luc (played by Kevin Kline) is impotent, both sexually and in business. Luc’s impotence is remarked on in the dialogue and signified visually, both through the trope of the vine cutting he must keep safe until he can “plant” it to begin his vineyard, and through a sight gag involving a collapsing model of the Eiffel Tower. The action of the narrative also removes the financial resources to get his vineyard started from Luc’s control (he does not get to pawn the a stolen necklace that was to finance the venture). Finally, Luc needs both a mother—he refers to his mother in the past tense—and a matriarch for the vineyard he wishes to begin (the vineyard evoking notions not only of the maternal/feminine with connotations of earth, growth and fertility, but also of a family dynasty’s “roots.”) All of these needs are met in the figure of Ryan’s Kate. She puts up the “nest-egg” she has been building to buy a home as the funding for the vineyard, effectively becoming its “matriarch” (and saving Luc from arrest for selling

stolen goods). In addition, just as the film's lush ending signals Kate's sexual awakening, it also indicates that Luc's vitality has been restored through their union.

In their exhibitions of emotion and attempts at interpersonal connection, the men in the Meg Ryan romantic comedies provide a counter-example to traditional ideas of male psycho-sexual development. According to Chodorow, "the masculine heritage of the oedipus complex is that relational issues tend to be more repressed" (169). Because of this repression, she adds, "masculine personality . . . comes to be defined more in denial of relation and connection" (169). This "denial of relation and connection" is usually something these films' heroes must overcome, and always through their relationship with Ryan's character—another indication of her position as "holding mother". The fact that they do overcome this denial, however, and that these films end with an arguably equal relationship between a (newly) open male and a nurturing (but not passive) female indicates the possibility of a new type of sexual relation based on a re-conception of the maternal role and its effects on male and female subjectivity.

Concerns with maternity and the lost or absent mother are certainly nothing new to romantic comedy. Stanley Cavell, for instance, points to "the notable absence of the woman's mother" in the screwball "comedies of remarriage" the 1930s and 40s. For Cavell, however, this absence "continues the idea that the creation of the woman is the business of men" (57). The heroines of the classic screwball comedy are often "created" through their relation to a man clearly marked as a patriarchal male, and this dynamic is often reinforced by the added presence of the heroine's father or paternal figure.<sup>8</sup> In the

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<sup>8</sup>An arguable exception is *Bringing up Baby*, in which the all possible patriarchal representatives (except, perhaps, the rarely-seen lawyer Mr. Peabody) are either feminized, as in the case of Cary Grant's David Huxley, or turned into ineffectual fools, such as Major Applegate and Constable Slocum. *Baby*, however, is a film that is marked from beginning to end with anxieties over gender roles.

case of the Meg Ryan romances, however, the issue is not one of “the creation of the woman,” but, in Steve Neale’s words, “one of coupledness, compatibility, and romance” (286). However, Cavell’s further argument that maternal absence in the 30s and 40s comedies signals a reaction toward the “exhilarating” but “threatening” legacy left by the preceding generation of suffragettes may be significant to a discussion of contemporary romantic comedy. Like the films of the screwball era, the romantic comedies of the 80s and 90s follow a period of great strides for women’s rights—a period in which the rules of gender, maternity, and paternity were overturned, with often unsettling results. The search for the maternal in the Meg Ryan films, then, evokes a longing for a time when the roles for women as mother and daughter were more clearly defined and more secure. The films provide the space in which the female spectator can act out her own search for the lost mother.

To this point, I have been arguing that the Meg Ryan romances provide both progressive views on gender relations and a means by which women at the turn of the millennium can address the desires and fears of an uncertain, constantly changing culture. These are positive moves that allow the films to be more than simple patriarchal propaganda. This is not to say, however, that some of the fantasies the Ryan romances offer are not regressive, or that some of the desires are not, in Benjamin’s words, “represented by the phallus.” After all, these films are products of a still male-dominated industry and culture and will reflect their concerns. In order to reach the more progressive aspects of the Ryan films, the women who watch them must first contend with the movies’ more conservative aspects—and the often powerful enjoyment they can provide.

The Ryan comedies began to emerge during the period of what Steve Neale calls the “New Romance,” and share many concerns with the films in this category. As I state in the introduction to this chapter, Neale defines the New Romance as group of texts beginning in the 1980s that engage in a self-conscious return to the type of old-fashioned romance found, among other places, in Classical Hollywood film (287). Neale sees this movement in the genre as an attempt to re-think gender relationships in a culture complicated by “the advent of post-sixties feminism . . . Aids [sic]” and a general anxiety surrounding the “social conditions, institutions, discourses and practices that define and underpin” these relationships (286, 287). He argues that these films act as, “an assertion, within and against [contemporary social factors] of ‘traditional’ heterosexual romance” (286). The success of more traditionally romantic films like *Sleepless in Seattle* in this time of anxiety indicates a longing for some sense of security and stability in a complicated sexual culture. The return to tradition, however, risks reinforcing some of the very problems that first led to these complications.

The desire for the simplicity of relationships of an earlier era is often evoked in the New Romance by what Neale terms the “persistent evocation and endorsement of ‘old-fashioned’ romance” (295). The films will often feature romantic standards on the soundtrack or make references to earlier works like Hollywood films or Jane Austen’s novels. *Sleepless in Seattle*, one of Ryan’s most successful romantic comedies, makes significant and particularly unironic use of the markers of “old-fashioned romance.” The film’s soundtrack features a number of romantic standards, from Jimmy Durante’s rendition of “As Time Goes By” over the opening credits (the song already signifying the classic romance of *Casablanca*,) to Nat King Cole’s “Stardust.” The connections to



classic Hollywood romance are established most clearly in the film's use of *An Affair to Remember*, the 1957 Cary Grant/Deborah Kerr melodrama—in fact, *Sleepless* can be seen as a sort of contemporary retelling of the earlier picture. These markers of romantic tradition can add to the pleasures of more sentimental viewers by heightening the relationship's sweetness and feeling of “true” romance. Yet, by effectively removing the relationship from its contemporary setting, the film naturalizes heterosexual romance as a solution to the concerns of modern sexuality, without making any real attempt to engage those problems.

The drive toward a heterosexual union is a central characteristic of most forms of romance, although during some periods, such as the 1970s, this union signifies as much by its impossibility or absence as it does by its presence. Frank Krutnik argues that, “as a genre, romantic comedy is concerned with the normative and permissible forms of heterosexual union . . . it can be seen to be engaged in specifying and validating the parameters of heterosexual desire and intimacy” (62). He adds that in specifying these parameters, “the genre [displays] a firmly engrained conservatism, for it pushes toward and seeks to relegitimize a sanctioned heterosexual union—marriage” (62). For Krutnik, the drive to “relegitimize” heterosexual union in romantic comedy “betrays an intense longing for the restitution of faith in the stability of the heterosexual couple as some kind of bulwark against the modern world” (63). This longing becomes especially significant when considering the cultural and sexual climate in which many contemporary romances—including the Meg Ryan films—have emerged. As Rob Reiner's character puts it in *Sleepless in Seattle*, romance today means necking for years (with a woman who insists on paying for her own dinner) before you get to take a test and “do it with a

condom." By resurrecting the happy (heterosexual, monogamous) ending, the New Romance provides a space of certainty in a sexual arena fraught with uncertainty and even danger. But again, we must ask whether, by offering this space of certainty, these films simply reinforce the patriarchal status quo.

The New Romance, then, ends with the couple happily entering into a committed, monogamous, and, in Neale's words, "heavily conventional" relationship. Meg Ryan's films are clear participants in this trend, as each one ends with her character joined securely to the film's hero. *When Harry Met Sally . . .*, for example, is arguably one of the least "old-fashioned" of her romantic comedies, at least as it portrays its characters' sexuality. Yet, even this "modern" story ends with the central couple clearly married. The final scene returns to the mock interview device used throughout the film, this time with the now-married Harry and Sally as its subjects. Although this scene narratively establishes the couple's commitment, it serves another purpose. The return to the pseudo-documentary also connects Harry and Sally's relationship to those of the long-married older couples interviewed earlier in the picture, thereby celebrating long-term monogamy as tradition that transcends generations and cultural changes. Although there is no wedding at the end of *Sleepless in Seattle*, several shots in the final "Empire State Building" sequence indicate that the union of Annie and Sam will be permanent and monogamous. As the theme to *An Affair to Remember* plays on the soundtrack, a close-up of Sam's hand joining Annie's suggests the strength of the union. The film's final shot frames Annie, Sam, and Jonah together within an elevator doorway as a portrait of the family they are destined to become. That the film can evoke tears of happiness over

this new family even as it evades the issues faced by countless real-life blended families is both one of its greatest strengths and one of its greatest dangers.

The Ryan films also exhibit what is perhaps the most important and problematic feature of the New Romance—the return to traditional roles for the film’s heroines as a solution to contemporary anxieties about gender. While the Ryan character in most of these films begins as a professional woman, her job is either diminished against the importance of the relationship, or she must by the film’s conclusion give up or lose her job in order to bring about the happy romantic ending. In *You’ve Got Mail*, Ryan plays a smart, independent owner of a children’s bookstore who is eventually forced out of business by a large chain store. By the end of the film, Ryan has lost her store, but found true love with a great guy. (That this great guy is the very man whose company drove her out of business is papered over by the gorgeous setting, sentimental music, and Ryan’s tears when the couple finally unites at the end of the picture). The notion of returning the woman to her traditional position is made even more concrete in *Kate and Leopold*. In this film, Ryan’s character must give up her job as a high-powered market researcher and literally return to the past to be with her true love—a 19th century English duke who at one point literally rides to her rescue on a white horse. Perhaps, though, we should not underestimate the appeal of even this patriarchal scenario for a contemporary female viewer. For ninety minutes, she can forget the pressures of the modern work world indulge in the fantasy of being cared for by a handsome hero—and without sacrificing any of the gains she has made in the “real world.”

Still, the conservative attitudes of the Ryan films toward their female protagonists illustrate what Neale calls the “dominant ideological tendency” of the New Romance: the

attempt to use old fashioned romance to “[counter] any ‘threat’ of female independence” (298). This tendency takes on particular significance when we consider that the New Romance began to appear after the second-wave feminist movement of the 1970s. In fact, these films could easily be seen as part of what Susan Faludi calls the “backlash” against feminism that emerged most strongly during the 1980s. Neale analyzes “New Romances” like *Something Wild* and *Peggy Sue Got Married* to highlight the genre’s tendency to “[manoeuvre] its couple, and its heroine in particular, into an ‘old-fashioned,’ ‘traditional’ and ideologically conventional position” (297). In *Something Wild*, for example, he points out that the initially unconventional, sexually liberated heroine must “[shed] her wildness” by the end of the film and be rescued by the film’s hero (297). Throughout the New Romance, Neale argues, an “equal partnership” or “genuine balance” between the hero and heroine is rare (293). Although we have seen that the Meg Ryan comedies make attempts toward this balance, we should ask whether these attempts are not overshadowed by the films’ more conventional sexual discourse.

Of all the romances I examine in this study, many of those starring Meg Ryan are arguably among the most overtly conservative in their narratives and in their stylistic appeals to old-fashioned romance. The heroine of a Meg Ryan romantic comedy will more often than not end the film by quitting her job and/or moving across the country (or across an ocean) to be with the man she loves, a beatific smile on her face and Nat King Cole singing on the soundtrack. As we have seen however, these texts are more complicated than they first appear, and the fantasies they offer their contemporary viewers operate in a number of complex ways. These complexities are significant, not only for what they reveal about the Ryan films, but perhaps for what they have to say

about “mass-produced fantasies for women” in general. If, rather than immediately dismissing them as regressive, we can understand these texts as multi-layered fantasies that speak to a broad range of anxieties and desires, then we no longer need simply reject them as patriarchal propaganda or useless fluff. If we can do that, we can renounce their restrictive power while at the same time appreciating the pleasures they provide.

CHAPTER 2  
PRETTY WOMEN AND RUNAWAY BRIDES:  
THE JULIA ROBERTS ROMANTIC COMEDIES

Maybe there won't be marriage. Maybe there won't be sex. But by God, there'll be dancing!

--George (Rupert Everett), *My Best Friend's Wedding*

In a scene early in *Pretty Woman* (1990), Julia Roberts, as the young streetwalker Vivian, sits before a television engrossed in the conclusion of *Charade*, the 1963 action romance starring Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn. This moment resonates with the issues I raise in this chapter in several ways. First, like the scene from *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) mentioned in my introduction, it echoes the main theme of this project: women watching romantic comedies. More significant to this chapter, however, is the connection this moment forges between a (very late) product of the Hollywood studio system and contemporary romance. The similarities between Julia Roberts's romantic comedy image and Classical Hollywood's construction of the female image are important to understanding the Roberts romances' conservative operations. As we will see, the romances starring Julia Roberts lend themselves to the kind of analysis feminist film critics first applied to Classical Hollywood film, particularly in their treatment of the female image. Two decades after the height of the Women's Movement and the work of feminist film theorists such as Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane, the Roberts romances continue to position their central female figure as erotic spectacle or bearer of male meaning-making. They reinforce their conservative operations by mobilizing the regressive fantasies that bombard women from childhood in fairytales and other cultural

texts. Still, the popularity of the Roberts romances implies that they must perform operations that make them palatable—even pleasurable—to contemporary women. Though they contain unmistakably conservative overtones, they complicate these notions by foregrounding their identity as fantasy, wish-fulfillment, or parody of the Hollywood romance, and by suggesting alternatives to traditional, patriarchally-defined heterosexual romance.

The Roberts romances begin their conservative operations by performing one of the most direct and long-standing maneuvers of patriarchal visual culture: constructing the female as erotic object. In many of her romantic comedies, Roberts is presented as an eroticized spectacle for both characters in the films and for the spectator. (As I discuss later, Roberts becomes an object, not only visually, but through her place in the films' narratives and in their discourses on male and female desire.) The construction of Roberts as erotic spectacle conforms closely to Laura Mulvey's assessment of Woman's place in visual culture. Mulvey writes that "in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can connote "to-be-looked-at-ness" ("Visual Pleasure" 19). It may seem simplistic to return to the "woman as object of the gaze" theories of 1970s feminist film theory to discuss films that began appearing in the 1990s, but the Roberts romances so clearly—and unironically—illustrate these theories that the connection must be followed and its implications explored.

One of the clearest examples of Roberts's eroticized image is the film that brought her into the public spotlight (and still shapes her popular persona), *Pretty Woman*. Indeed, it could be argued that Julia Roberts became a major star on the strength of a

movie that literalizes the visual and narrative objectification of women. Her first appearance in this film is a clear illustration of Mulvey's theories of woman as spectacle. Roberts's character, Vivian, is introduced through a series of shots that fragment different parts of her body, turning them into a potential fetish for the viewer. The first shot, in which she is clad in only slight, lacy underwear, is a tight shot that roams over her thighs, hips and stomach. This is followed by a series of quick close-ups on different parts of her body, including breasts, arms, and a shot tracks over her leg as she zips up an unmistakably phallic high-heeled black boot. Interestingly, many of the features shown in this scene do not belong to Roberts, but to a body double. The use of the double, however, only reinforces the fact that this sequence is about eroticizing the female image, no matter the woman behind it. (This sequence is echoed ten years later in a similar, shorter moment in *Notting Hill*. In this film, a shot of Roberts descending a flight of stairs focuses, not on her whole body or even her face, but on her well-toned abs, revealed in a midriff-baring top.)

Roberts's position as spectacle is often reinforced in the roles she plays, as her characters are engaged in professions that define them as commodities to be looked at and traded. In *Pretty Woman*, for example, her character works a prostitute, a profession based—at least as it is portrayed in the film—on the overt display of the female body being “sold.” In the first and only scene to show Roberts's character working the streets, much diegetic emphasis is given to her physical appearance and performance. She removes her overcoat, revealing a skimpy outfit that signifies “streetwalker,” and a long shot shows her walking seductively to her potential customer's car as her friend encourages her performance (“Oh, yeah! Work it, baby!”). While the world-famous



movie-star she portrays in *Notting Hill* (1999) is far removed socially and economically from the world of a Hollywood Boulevard hooker, the film makes it clear that (female) movie stardom is as dependent on the erotic objectification of the woman as prostitution is. *Notting Hill* opens with a montage of shots (some constructed especially for the film and others culled from actual footage) of Roberts/her character arriving at a variety of red-carpet events, smiling and posing for crowds of fans and paparazzi. She has no dialogue in this sequence but is instead presented as a series of images disconnected from any narrative thread or character development, offered for the enjoyment of the film's spectator. The eroticisation of the female star (and, as one character remarks, the connection between "actress" and "prostitute") is reinforced later in the film, when nude pictures taken of Roberts' character years earlier surface in the tabloids. Though the spectator only sees a brief, blurred shot of the photos, the idea of the female star as erotic spectacle—particularly in this text—is clear.

The eroticisation of Roberts's image in her romantic comedies is somewhat of an anomaly, as most contemporary romantic comedies do not make their lead females overt erotic spectacles. Of the three major female romantic comedy stars of the 1990s, Roberts's romantic comedy persona is decidedly more contemporary and more overtly sexualized than, for example, Meg Ryan's wholesome, "old-fashioned" romantic image. Ryan, as we have seen in the previous chapter, is often presented as physically beautiful in her romances, but she is also nearly always presented as "pure" and rarely overtly sexualized. Likewise, Sandra Bullock, while presented as attractive in a "girl-next-door" manner, is often portrayed in a way that specifically avoids aestheticizing or eroticizing her, often to the point of making her dowdy—see her plain, almost frumpy appearance in

*While You Were Sleeping* (1995), *Miss Congeniality* (2000) and *Two Weeks' Notice* (2002). On occasion, she is given the scene of the plain duckling made over into a swan, as in *Miss Congeniality*. The potential for eroticizing Bullock in this scene, however, is undercut with a joke (she trips and falls out of the shot) that resists attempts to make Bullock an erotic spectacle, both in its humor, and in its literal removal of her image from the gaze just at the moment she could be turned into its object. As I argued in the previous chapter, the relatively chaste romantic comedy heroine of recent years is part of a potentially conservative fantasy aimed at a contemporary audience longing for a time when sexual relations were ostensibly more innocent and less confusing. Though in theory a more sexual romantic comedy heroine can be seen as more modern and presumably more empowered, the sexuality of Roberts's characters is most often constructed for the pleasure of the (presumably, but not necessarily, male) viewer, and according to the desires of the films' male characters.

In the Roberts romantic comedies, not only feminine sexuality, but feminine identity and meaning operate within predominantly patriarchal paradigms. Just as she is constructed visually and narratively as erotic spectacle, Roberts is also often situated as a figure to be defined according to masculine desire. In this she occupies Woman's position in symbolic production as theorized by Mulvey. "Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other," writes Mulvey. "[She is] bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning" ("Visual Pleasure" 15). In her romantic comedies, Roberts is often presented both visually and narratively as this female "bearer, not maker,

of meaning." In fact, one of the main issues in the Roberts romances (though it is not always directly stated) is how her character's true self will be defined. This question is particularly important for these films' female viewers. As modern women attempt to sort through the many positions the women's movement has opened up to them, they are faced with an enormous variety of discourses on how women can or should define themselves—many of which are cloaked in terms of female empowerment and "having it all". In the Roberts films, however, as in many other contemporary popular texts, the question of feminine identity and meaning is still answered according to masculine power and desires.

The notion that a woman's identity is constructed according to masculine desire is performed visually in a number of the Roberts romances, often through changes in her physical appearance. Each shot of Roberts in the opening montage of *Notting Hill*, for example, shows her in a series of ever-changing hair cuts and color, make-up, and clothing styles. Logically, these changes convey the notion of Roberts's character as a star appearing at a series of events over an extended period of time. On another level, however, this sequence raises questions of feminine identity—who controls it and how and why it changes. The fact that Roberts's character is a movie star (being played by a movie star) places these questions within the context of the mainstream film industry. Despite the growing number of women stepping into positions of power over the past decades (including Roberts herself), Hollywood is still controlled primarily by men, and one of its major products is the commodified female image. This product—including its appearance—is constructed and changes according to the dictates of this male-dominated industry

The physical changes her character undergoes in *Pretty Woman* further illustrate the economic and erotic implications attached to the changeable female image. As her character finds love, sex and financial security with a millionaire business tycoon (Richard Gere), Roberts goes through three distinct phases in her physical appearance. As we have seen, in the early part of the film, before a rapport between Roberts/Vivian and Gere/Edward is established, she is represented with all the signifiers of the streetwalker, including platinum blonde wig and dominatrix boots. After the first sexual encounter between the two, however, she is revealed to be a coltish young woman with unruly red hair. It is this appearance that sells the film's fantasy and helps avoid the issue of prostitution. In this guise, Vivian is not a prostitute, but, much like Cinderella, a high-spirited young woman from another class who just needs to learn (from men) about the finer things in life in order to become a viable heroine. In her final transformation, signaling her complete connection to the hero and his class, her appearance is literally tamed—her hair is straightened and smoothed, and she is dressed in the understated, expensive clothing she purchases (with Edward's money) in the upscale shops on Rodeo Drive. These changes signify the conflation of the erotic and the economic that is part of women's existence, both on the screen and in our culture.

Narratively, the Roberts romantic comedies reinforce the sexist operations that inform her physical presence: The best way for a woman to achieve economic stability (and, as we will see below, true love) is to define herself according to male desires. As I suggest above, the transformation of Roberts's Vivian from prostitute to coltish young woman to upper-class "lady" in *Pretty Woman* takes place according to the desires and under the guidance of the male characters in her orbit (this includes not only Richard

Gere's wealthy businessman, but the kindly hotel concierge who assists Vivian in learning how to dress and behave like a refined lady). However, even before Vivian encounters these men her character already embodies the connections between feminine sexuality and masculine economic power that continue to drive contemporary culture. As a prostitute, Vivian is engaged in a profession that is based (for the most part) on the sexualized female body enacting masculine fantasies in exchange for monetary compensation. This operation is foregrounded in a bit of dialogue that is repeated several times in the film: Whenever a man (a potential customer) asks Vivian her name, she always responds by asking the man what *he* wants it to be. While it can be assumed that most of *Pretty Woman's* spectators are not actively engaged in prostitution, many of them live and work in a culture where the connections between female sexuality and the male-dominated capitalist structure are constantly foregrounded, whether through public debates on sexual harassment policies or in rap videos that feature wealthy young men showering money and elaborate gifts on scantily-clad young women. The implications of *Pretty Woman's* construction of femininity is clear: The capitalist system is still the domain of men, but women can achieve upward mobility through the (selective) use of their sexuality.

While *Pretty Woman* operates on the economic ties between masculine fantasy and female meaning-bearing, other Roberts films present a less overtly cynical yet still potentially regressive representation of contemporary female identity and sexuality for their spectators. Many of the romances in which she stars seem to argue that a woman can achieve not only economic stability, but the happiness that can only come from a meaningful monogamous relationship, if she makes herself an object of male fantasy and

meaning-making. Her character Maggie in *Runaway Bride*, for example, literally defines herself—both visually and otherwise—according to the man she is with at the time. The premise of the film is that Maggie has been engaged multiple times, but has yet to complete a walk down the aisle. The film begins before a fourth (soon-to-be-aborted) wedding, but spectator is provided with information on the three previous grooms through the interaction of each man with the film's main characters and in a sequence in which Maggie's "true" future husband (played again by Richard Gere) watches videos of each ceremony. Each of Maggie's fiancés is given a distinct personality, whether Deadhead, gentle Catholic priest (he took his vows post-Maggie), or bookish entomologist. Maggie, however, is portrayed as a woman who has no preferences of her own and changes her identity according which man she is involved with at the time. (A running joke plays on the fact that she changes her egg orders to match each fiancé's preference.)

Visually, the wedding video footage shows that she also adapts her personal style to that of her groom, becoming a peace-sign flashing "hippie chick," demure Catholic bride, or maiden on horseback. At one point she even literally marks her body with the signifier of her mate's personality, getting a (removable) DeadHead rose tattoo. Now, some of the conservative pull of this story may be undercut by characterization (Maggie is a seemingly independent tomboy who runs her own hardware store and has aspirations of making industrial art) and by Roberts's feisty, funny performance. Yet this is still a film in which the central questions are who this woman is and what she wants—questions that are only answered the urging of yet another man, the film's hero (Gere). *Runaway Bride*, like the other Roberts romances, takes questions of feminine identity and desire

that have been circulating in the larger culture and answers them with a decidedly traditional, patriarchal spin. In fact, the near desperation of these films to present female subjectivity as dependent on male control can be read as—again, to borrow Susan Faludi's term—a backlash against more than three decades of discourse on women's self-definition.

The patriarchal overtones of the Roberts romances are so strong that I want to take a moment here and examine the fantasies that at least one of these films offers its male viewers. Perhaps more than any of the other Roberts films, *Notting Hill* presents its masculine spectator with a scenario in which a woman's image and identity are almost literally possessed by a man. As we have seen, the opening montage presents Roberts as changeable feminine image, the soundtrack accompanying this sequence features Elvis Costello's rendition of "She," a song that voices a man's inability to figure out the female object of his desire. (One of the lines of the song, in a tribute to feminine inscrutability, proclaims that "she may not be what she may seem.") The notion of Woman as a site of construction of male desire and fantasy is further reinforced as this sequence ends. As the Costello song comes to a close, a voice-over by Hugh Grant (who plays William, Roberts's "regular guy" love interest) establishes the relationship of Grant/William to Roberts/Anna as one of a male spectator to a female image. He reveals that he's "seen all her films" and thinks she's "fabulous," but that of course for him she is an ethereal image who exists "a million, million miles away" from the real world in which he lives and struggles to make a go of his small bookstore. Because William has—at this point in the film—never met the "real" Anna, her image is available to him for whatever fantasies he wishes to enact.

The relationship set up in this sequence is borne out by the film's narrative strategies and its placement of both William and Anna in that narrative. This story belongs completely to William—he is given friends, a business, and a life removed from Anna. Anna, however, exists in the plot only as she interacts with William in his world. Each time Anna appears she is accompanied or observed by William or one of his friends. Anna is never shown alone, with her own circle of acquaintances, or in any other scene that would give a sense of her character's existence as a whole being. She is—even, to a large extent, within the diegesis—more image than fully rounded character. The fantasy of the male spectator possessing the female image is even more potent in a visual culture whose largest commodity, as I stated above, is that female image. Beyond that, however, the fantasy offered in *Notting Hill* is even more pertinent when considering the film's social and historical context. Although numerous hurdles still exist, women at the turn of the millennium are gaining increasing social and economic power—a fact that most likely causes anxieties among men who see their hold on the culture becoming more and more tenuous. A scenario in which a financially troubled man virtually possesses a socially and economically superior woman not only reinforces traditional gender and power relationships, but no doubt assuages the anxieties of the male who is no longer sure of his place in a society where those relationships are no longer completely stable.

Indeed, Roberts's romantic comedy image is so strongly constructed according to traditional patriarchal ideology that it evokes the memory of a number of studio-era actresses, perhaps most particularly Rita Hayworth. Especially in the early part of her career, Roberts often bears a striking visual similarity to Hayworth. The long, reddish



hair she wears in (among other films) *Pretty Woman* and *My Best Friend's Wedding* is reminiscent of Hayworth's appearance in films like *Gilda* (1946) and *Cover Girl* (1944), as is her wide smile. Interestingly, *Cover Girl* and *Gilda*, though not romantic comedies in the strictest sense, are films that, like the Roberts romances under consideration here, position their star visually as objects of multiple (male) gazes and narratively as women waiting to be defined by (the right) man. The most direct connection between Roberts and Hayworth, however, is found in a bit of dialogue in *Notting Hill* (Roberts's straight, dark hair in this film removes her visually from any direct reference to Hayworth, but her character's position as famous movie star leaves open the possibility of that connection). After Roberts/Anna's first night with Grant/William, she brings up Hayworth's famous statement that the men who sleep with her (Hayworth) "go to bed with Gilda" and are inevitably disappointed when they wake up with the arguably less glamorous real woman Hayworth. Although it is alluded to in several instances, Roberts's resemblance to Hayworth is never really treated as more than that—and this is where the Roberts romances are in some ways more conservative than their predecessors. In a truly progressive text, the Roberts/Hayworth similarity could be utilized ironically, or to make a statement about the evolution of sexual relations and their popular representations since the studio system. Yet, although Roberts's characters (and her performances) could be considered more modern or independent than those of Hayworth, she is still, in most of her romances, primarily an object of desire, not a desiring subject.

Although Rita Hayworth is perhaps the studio-era star easiest to identify with Roberts, the presentation of Roberts's characters in a number of her romances sometimes echoes those of female leads in classical romantic comedies. The treatment of

Maggie/Roberts in an early sequence in *Runaway Bride*, for example, is strikingly similar to the way Katharine Hepburn's character is presented in the opening of *Woman of the Year*. In both films, the woman is introduced in a way that keeps her from being a fully rounded character—or, within the diegesis, a complete person—even as the other (primarily male) characters discuss her. Hepburn's voice is heard, but she is seen only in a grainy newspaper headshot in the first few scenes of the film. Roberts appears, but does not speak, as a number of mostly male characters read the diatribe against her character written by Richard Gere's Ike, a cheerfully misogynistic writer who deals directly with (often negative) feminine archetypes in his column, including the Cheerleader and the Man-eater. (Interestingly, in both films the trope of the newspaper column provides a forum for masculine creation of a feminine ideal.) These similarities are merely structural, however, and a comparison reveals how the later film may be in some ways *more* conservative than its predecessor. Despite its ideological red flags (and as a product of a patriarchal institution it has many), *Woman of the Year* appears deal sincerely with issues of gender (or it at least attempts to) three decades before those issues would become a common part of popular discourse. Additionally, Katharine Hepburn's screen persona largely resists patriarchal containment, despite the machinations of the script and the formidably masculine presence of co-star Spencer Tracy. Nearly sixty years later, however, *Runaway Bride* pathologizes feminine resistance to patriarchal institutions. Maggie can't marry, not because she objects to the institution, but because she is, in her own words, "screwed up." Moreover, this pathology is embodied in a performance that is as child-like as it is admittedly spirited. Throughout the film, Roberts blows bubbles with her bubblegum, reacts with childish

glee when she wins a card game, and swings on a church bell-pull like a little girl. It would seem, then, that nearly half a century after the Hollywood studio system, romantic comedy—at least in the case of the Julia Roberts romances—is even more about, in Stanley Cavell's words, "the creation of the woman" by the man than it was when patriarchy was arguably more visible and more powerful.

The visual and narrative objectification of women in the Roberts romantic comedies (as well as in dramas such as *Erin Brokovich*) is so overt that it should send viewers with even a modicum of feminist consciousness running from the multiplex.<sup>1</sup> Instead, these films have been commercial and critical successes. In its original U.S. theatrical run, *Pretty Woman* grossed over \$178 million (this also makes it the highest-grossing film in this study). and *Notting Hill* received generally warm reviews (Rubinfeld 71). How have such deliberately retrograde images become so popular in an era when terms like "objectification of women" have become a part of everyday conversation? The success of these films, I believe, rests on how effectively they address their fantasies to women at the turn of the millennium.

Despite their overtly regressive representations, the romantic comedies starring Julia Roberts exert a strong attraction for (primarily) female viewers. They are so widely accepted—even among women who in any other context might identify as feminist—because they perform operations (both conservative and more progressive) that directly address women trying to make sense of the sexual and economic terrain of millennial culture. Like the Meg Ryan romances, they offer both regressive answers to the

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<sup>1</sup> Moreover, these are relatively tame examples from a popular culture that provides us with increasingly eroticized images of women across forms, from advertisements for high-fashion houses such as Dior and YSL to the music videos of such pop stars as Britney Spears.

questions of modern sexuality and arguably more progressive ideas about romance and women's place in it. They make their more objectionable moments more acceptable by employing the signifiers of romance, and, more specifically, by cloaking them in the patriarchal, yet still quite powerful fairytales and other fantasies fed to women from birth. They present stories of beautiful young women being rescued from poverty or unhappiness by wealthy, handsome princes, or old-fashioned tales of love played out in often idyllic settings against a backdrop of close-knit, quirky families and communities. At the same time, however, these films provide glimpses into their constructedness, into their very existence as Hollywood wish-fulfillment, that open a space for their (female) spectators to enjoy the fantasy even as they question the assumptions that underlie it.

*Pretty Woman* makes its potentially problematic position on economics and female sexuality more palatable by papering over this position with a love story, effectively effacing the difficulties experienced by modern working women. Roberts's character is a hooker—not a “high-class call girl” (whatever that term may mean) who services an elite list of clients, but a woman who literally walks the (often dangerous) streets of Hollywood in order to earn a living. While the fact that Vivian is a prostitute is made clear in the dialogue, the reality of this life, at least as it applies to Vivian, is evaded throughout much of the film.<sup>2</sup> Vivian is never portrayed having sex with any clients besides Edward, thus erasing for the viewer one of the harshest realities of the profession. Further, she is generally shown as different from the other prostitutes in the film. A clear

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<sup>2</sup>Much of the publicity surrounding *Pretty Woman* performs a similar evasion. In the director's commentary for the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition DVD, Garry Marshall never refers to Vivian as a prostitute, but as a “girl from the streets.” Likewise, the plot summary on the DVD cover refers to Vivian only as a “carefree” young woman with an “energetic spirit,” and the relationship between Vivian and Edward as a “timeless rags-to-riches romance.” No mention is made of Vivian's line of work or the transaction that begins the romance. The final film is a departure from the reportedly darker original script, which portrayed the Vivian character as a drug addict and had Edward forcefully reject her at the end of the story.

contrast is set up in the character of Vivian's best friend Kit. While the film positions Vivian as a good-hearted "working girl" with potential, Kit is shown as a "true" prostitute, with all the behaviors and problems expected in one—she is uneducated and unrefined (signified by her bad grammar and use of vulgar language), she uses drugs, and she is being threatened by dangerous local characters.

These displacements and erasures work at the level of the narrative to help the audience forget Vivian's profession and position her as a more viable mainstream romantic comedy heroine. The idea of prostitution, however, is open to a more symbolic reading. If prostitution represents female work experience in general, we see that the film attempts to efface what is a significant element of late 20<sup>th</sup> century female existence. Although women entered the labor force in greater numbers after the 1960s, many of them still suffered economically. Karen V. Lombard writes that "market opportunities for women of different skill levels began to dramatically diverge during the 1980s," leaving less-skilled and less-educated women with less earning potential. As a literal "working girl," Vivian can be understood as the embodiment of Diana Pierce's concept of the "feminization of poverty" and the struggles of un- and under-employed women of the 1980s (Rosen 337). When Vivian's prostitution is read as more generally representing women in the contemporary workforce, it becomes clear that the film actually works to erase the difficulties—low wages, difficult hours, (possible) sexual harassment—most likely experienced by many of the women who watch it.

Through its portrayal of its central love story, *Pretty Woman* provides a further disconnect between sexual relationships and economic conditions that, even in contemporary culture, continue to underlie them. Like the facts of Vivian's lifestyle, the

financial basis of the film's central relationship is laid out through dialogue, but diminished through stylistic techniques and the screen presence of the two lead actors. In one early scene, Edward and Vivian negotiate the details of their arrangement, offering and counter-offering a fair price for Vivian's services. The meaning of this arrangement as a business transaction, however, is undercut by the setting and by Roberts's and Gere's performances. The exchange takes place in an elegant hotel bathroom as Vivian enjoys a bubble bath), rather than the cold, gray Lewis Industries offices that are contrasted with Vivian and Edward's penthouse hotel suite throughout the film. The charisma of the two stars (this scene seems to ask who would ever need to be *paid* to sleep with either of them), combined with the flirting tone in which both play this moment, makes it clear that these two people are brought together by sexual attraction, not economics.

Likewise, the sex scenes between Vivian and Edward are not staged or shot as emotionless encounters between a "hooker" and a "john," but as traditional movie love scenes. They are warmly lit, softly photographed, and accompanied by the type of romantic music to be expected in such scenes. The deluxe hotel setting of these scenes should foreground the economic facts of this relationship (particularly since it is so far beyond the means of one of the lovers), but because such images of luxury have become such clear signifiers of romance, they simply reinforce the emotional aspects of the story over the economic.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the film becomes, not a statement on the financial and class considerations that often continue to inform sexual relationships, but a story about the developing romance between two lonely, attractive people who teach each other a little

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<sup>3</sup> For more on the connections between, class, consumer culture and romance, see Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Berkeley, U of California Press, 1997.

about life. This is ironic, of course, since in a very real way *Pretty Woman* is *all* about the connections between sex and economics. That it can give its spectators ways to avoid this fact, even as it foregrounds it, is no doubt part of the reason for its success.

Of all the Roberts romantic comedies, *Pretty Woman* also draws most directly on the fairy tales most women imbibe from childhood.<sup>4</sup> The story of a beautiful but poor “working girl” who falls in love with a rich, handsome millionaire, it draws on the folk tale traditions of the maiden in the tower and her need to be rescued by a handsome prince. The connection to Cinderella and other fairy tales is expressed in the film’s setting—the humble, “tower prison dwellings” of the heroine, the lavish penthouse “castle” of the hero—and its action—Edward roars into town in a Lotus Esprit (the 1990s version of the white steed), Vivian is transformed (with the help of “fairy godparents”) into a princess, and Edward literally climbs to Vivian’s rescue in the film’s final scene. Moreover, the film places references to fairy-tales directly into the mouth of its female lead. Vivian tells Edward her own fairy-tale: When Vivian misbehaved as a child, her mother would lock her in the attic, leaving her to dream that someday a prince would ride in on his white steed and take her away. In this story, the fairy-tale ending clearly includes marriage to the handsome prince. Near the end of the film, Edward offers Vivian a life that doesn’t conform to the “happily ever after” of most romantic folk tales—he wants to set her up with an apartment and some money, but does not propose marriage or even a committed intimate relationship. Vivian rejects Edward’s offer, saying that she wants “the fairy-tale.” In the context of this scene and this film, the fairy-

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<sup>4</sup> The connection between *Pretty Woman* and fairy-tales has been noted previously, as in Karol Kelley’s “A Modern Cinderella,” *Journal of American Culture* 17:1, Spring 1994, and by Tina Olsin Lent in her presentation at the 2003 Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference, entitled “Uses of Enchantment and Chocolate: An Analysis of Magical Elements in Romantic Comedy and Fairy Tale.”

tale means not just a sexual relationship, which Edward and Vivian have already begun, but a long-term, monogamous and—although it is never directly stated—matrimonial bond. In the end, of course, Vivian—and the film's spectators—do get the ideal fairy tale ending. Edward rides to Vivian's "tower," flowers in hand, to whisk her off to his "castle" where they will live happily ever after, presumably in wedded—or at least permanently committed—bliss.

In presenting its central romance as a modern fairy-tale, *Pretty Woman* mobilizes a set of texts—and the conservative ideologies that underlie them—that continue to exert a strong cultural influence. These stories are so much a part of our culture that they have become ripe for alternative versions, from Angela Carter's feminist re-readings to a recent credit card commercial featuring a modern-day Cinderella enjoying a shopping spree with a stolen Visa card. Despite these variations, fairy-tale references are still primarily employed to reinforce patriarchal ideology—most often where gender relationships and female sexuality are concerned. In its references to Cinderella, *Pretty Woman* performs just such a conservative operation. The heroine wants nothing more than to be rescued by the rich, handsome prince and whisked away to a life of wealth and heterosexual monogamy. By placing these desires in the mouth of its heroine, who has been portrayed as a strong-willed young woman who takes pride in being able to take care of herself, the film seeks to activate fantasies of rescue and traditional male/female roles in the film's female viewers. These fantasies are even more potent for contemporary viewers, who no doubt wish to be rescued from lives filled with the constant warnings of physical danger (nightly newscasts constantly broadcasting images of war and terrorist attacks, or constantly reminding women to protect themselves from



sexual and physical assault) and the everyday stress of trying to make ends meet with increasingly insufficient income.

Nearly ten years after *Pretty Woman*, the same personnel—Roberts, Gere, director Garry Marshall and co-star Hector Elizondo—re-assemble in *Runaway Bride*, a romance that offers equally conservative answers to the questions facing contemporary women. In this case, the romance plays out, not as a fairy-tale, but in a scenario that mimics Freud's theories of female sexual development. According to Freud, female sexual maturity is reached once the girl has passed through a pre-Oedipal connection to her mother and transferred her affections to her father in the Oedipal phase. Juliet Mitchell, following Freud, describes the girl's movement from pre-Oedipal maternal attachment to Oedipal paternal attachment and the implications of this transfer:

By exploiting her passive instinctual impulses . . . [the girl] can transfer her sexual attentions . . . to her father, she can want first his phallus, and then by the all-important analogy his baby, then the man again, to give her this baby. Thus she becomes a little woman. This transference from mother to father is the girl's 'positive' Oedipus complex, and, it is the first correct step on her path to womanhood, there is no need for her to leave it. (97)

For Freud, a girl's successful passage through the Oedipus complex has positive implications for her sexual relationships as an adult. "If the girl has remained in her attachment to her father—that is in the Oedipus complex—her choice is made according to the paternal type," he writes, adding that "a choice of this kind should guarantee a happy marriage" ("Femininity 360). The paternalistic tone of Freud's theories of female development has been challenged by many critics in the decades since he published them, but the image of a young woman leaving her father's house to marry a man just like Daddy still informs—consciously and unconsciously, positively and negatively—

contemporary popular ideas about sexual relationships. Indeed, in *Runaway Bride* this scenario is acted out quite literally.

The similarity between the familial relationships in *Runaway Bride* and the family dynamics Freud describes are striking. To begin with, the story's heroine, Maggie (Roberts), still lives in the family home with her father and grandmother—despite the fact that she is at least thirty, runs her own business, and has had serious adult relationships with at least four men (the four jilted fiancés). Maggie's bond with her father, while arguably dysfunctional (he is an alcoholic and she must constantly clean up his messes), is presented as the primary influence in her life. We are even led to infer that her difficult relationship with her father is one of the main reasons Maggie has not been able to fully commit to a man. It is not until she resolves her issues with her father—she confronts him about his drinking—that she is able to move into a fully committed adult sexual union (with Ike/Richard Gere, the film's hero and patriarchal successor). Thus, the film's primary question is how to affect the heroine's transition from her Oedipal attachment to her father to a relationship with a marriageable man. The centrality of this question is all the more striking, given that it plays out within a literal family setting.

Although Maggie's relationship with her father gets the most narrative attention, it is also important to note the film's placement of Maggie's mother. As we saw in the previous chapter, the maternal bond—though not always dealt with directly—can be as significant in romantic comedies (and the sexual relationships they portray) as the presence of the ostensibly more powerful father. Maggie's mother is not present in the film, having died some years before the plot begins (a literal enactment of the mother's displacement during the daughter's Oedipal phase), but she is still in some sense a

structuring absence for her relationships. Though it is never directly stated, it can be assumed that her death is at least part of the reason her husband drinks—and therefore at least a partial source of the father-daughter conflict and Maggie's problems with men. Despite the physical absence of the mother and the focus on the (figurative) Oedipal relationship between father and daughter, however, the film constructs Maggie's continuing connection to her mother similarly to the lingering pre-Oedipal mother/daughter bond theorized by Freud, Jessica Benjamin and others.

The significance of this continuing connection is highlighted both visually and through dialogue in one of the few scenes in which Maggie's mother is mentioned directly. As Maggie's father tells Ike about Maggie's similarity to her mother, we see a shot of Maggie's parents as a young couple. The prop in this shot is a charcoal drawing of a man and a woman in the clothing and hairstyles of the late 1960s or early 1970s. The woman in the sketch bears an unmistakable, deliberate resemblance to Julia Roberts; indeed, there is little doubt that the resemblance is deliberate and that Roberts herself is the model for the drawing. Like the "twirling" photo in our earlier discussion of *You've Got Mail*, this portrait is a visual signifier of the mother/daughter bond and that bond's place in the daughter's adult sexual relationships—a bond made even more clear in this case as the image of the deceased mother is that of the actress playing the daughter. Unlike *You've Got Mail*, however, *Runaway Bride* ultimately places the maternal bond in the background of its story. Its main concern is the continuation of the patriarchal system, specifically the daughter's passage from father to the adult male onto whom she can transfer her desires.

As a text that speaks to women at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *Runaway Bride* performs many of the conservative operations describe by Frank Krutnik in his discussion of romantic comedy and Steve Neale in his outline of the "New Romance" of the 1980s and 1990s—specifically the genre's need to affirm traditional, monogamous (marital) heterosexual relationships. In *Runaway Bride*, this affirmation is presented in a number of ways. First, the film presents marriage as an essential desire of all women—even the titular "runaway bride." Though Maggie leaves four different grooms at the altar, the film makes it clear that her problem is not marriage as an institution or a woman's place in a traditional marriage relationship. Despite declaration that she wants to ride off into the sunset on her own horse, she is not given dialogue that conveys an anxiety about becoming a wife or mother (although her inability/refusal to actually complete a wedding ceremony could be read as a form of non-verbal resistance). Rather, the narrative stresses that it is Maggie's own issues—primarily, as discussed above, her relationship with her parents—that have prevented her from committing to marriage. When she does deal with her issues and find the right man, she happily goes through with the wedding—in fact, it is Maggie who proposes. To make it clear that Maggie is not the only woman who wants—or needs—to be married, the film ends with each single female character paired off with potential husband (including Maggie's cousin, who literally goes running after Maggie's jilted fiancé the moment Maggie drops him).

In an attempt to activate the same desire for marriage—or at least a wedding—in its female viewers, the film aestheticizes bridal preparations to maximize their appeal. In a key scene set in the local bridal shop, all the props for a beautiful, romantic wedding—flowers, veils, gorgeous dresses—are present and shot with cool tones and soft lighting

that play up their delicacy and loveliness. The performances of the actors in this scene reinforce the desirability of the traditional wedding, and by extension the traditional marriage it symbolizes. When Roberts, as Maggie, models Maggie's dream wedding dress, her softly curled long hair, wide, girlish smile and delight in the dress's "swishy" train convey the mythical transformation said to come upon any woman who puts on a beautiful wedding dress. Meanwhile, Gere, as Ike, watches Maggie's performance with an expression of equal parts desire and reverence—an expression, we are meant to understand, that every woman wants to see in her groom's face on her wedding day. To top off the enchanting scene—and to remind us of the role of procreation in the matrimonial union—an angelic blonde child peeks out from behind her mother's skirt, watching the proceedings in wonder.

To further enhance the desire for an old-fashioned wedding, the events of *Runaway Bride* are conveyed with a sense of nostalgia (heightened by setting the bulk of the film in an idyllic, beautifully shot small town) that evokes a time when marriage was a concern of not only the individuals involved, but of the family and the community. As we noted above, the bride-to-be in this film still lives at home with her father and grandmother—Grandma still makes Maggie's lunch every day. Maggie's family are heavily involved in her wedding preparations—her father follows the tradition of paying for his daughter's (first three aborted) wedding(s), her grandmother keeps videotapes of each ceremony, and her cousin serves as a bridesmaid at each event. Maggie's weddings are the focus, not only of her family's attention, but of the whole town. All of the film's supporting characters/townpeople appear at a pivotal pre-wedding luau to comment on Maggie's romantic history, and each is given a role in the various wedding scenes, from providing

food to broadcasting the event to taking bets on whether Maggie will run again. To further highlight the connection between marriage and community, the film ends with a montage of all the secondary characters celebrating the news of Ike and Maggie's marriage—each paired with his or her “right” partner.

As we have seen, then, the Julia Roberts romantic comedies provide overtly conservative fantasies that undoubtedly hold some appeal for their contemporary viewers. However, they also open themselves to alternative readings by announcing themselves as constructed fantasy or parody. The moments at which these films expose their construction are similar in their effect to those moments that disrupt filmic continuity and make the viewer aware of the cinematic apparatus, as theorized by Jean-Louis Baudry. For Baudry, the filmic experience depends on the

relation between the continuity necessary to the constitution of meaning and the ‘subject’ which constitutes this meaning: continuity is an attribute of the subject. It supposes the subject and it circumscribes its place. It appears in the cinema in the two complementary aspects of a “formal” continuity established through a system of negated differences and narrative continuity in the filmic space. (Baudry 538)

Baudry adds that when this continuity is disturbed, it affects the spectator's experience of both the film and of her/himself as subject—s/he becomes aware of both her/himself as constructed subject and the film as constructed object. “Thus disturbing cinematic elements . . . signify without fail the arrival of the instrument ‘in flesh and blood,’” Baudry writes. “Both specular tranquillity and the assurance of one's own identity collapse simultaneously with the revealing of the mechanism, that is, of the inscription of the film-work” (540). In much the same way, the moments of self-consciousness in the Julia Roberts romances can disrupt the spectator's smooth viewing experience, making her conscious of the film as a constructed text and of her own participation in creating its meaning. These moments are admittedly quite subtle, and they may not disrupt the films;

overall conservative meaning for many viewers. However, they do allow the spectator who wishes to read against the grain a space in which to question the assumptions and ideologies that underlie the text.

As we saw earlier, *Pretty Woman* mobilizes the full cultural force of the Cinderella story to provide its women viewers a fantasy of rescue by the handsome prince, wealth without guilt, and a relationship bound to last “happily ever after.” However, the allusions to Cinderella and other stories sprinkled throughout the film are so direct, and arguably so self-conscious, that the viewer who wishes to may examine them for additional, less restrictive meanings. Roberts’s Vivian is clearly both the damsel in need of rescue—she has her own tale of being locked in a tower—and the poor but noble girl waiting to be transformed by into a princess by marriage to the handsome prince (Gere’s Edward.) She is even given two guides through her transformation—Hector Elizondo as a kindly hotel concierge who is so clearly the story’s fairy godfather figure that all he’s missing is the magic wand, and Elinor Donahue, whose performance as the sweet, helpful clothing store manager evokes the three fairies in Disney’s animated version of *Sleeping Beauty*.

The final sequence of the film is equally heightened and self-conscious, pointing to the deliberate use of romantic fairy-tale elements. Edward arrives to “rescue” Vivian from her “tower,” complete with all the trappings of the fairy tale/Hollywood happy ending: dramatic music, flowers, and a final climb up the tower to rescue the fair maiden. Yet, though the fairy-tale aspects of this scene are certainly available for reading—and enjoying—on their own terms, the heightened nature of this sequence and the actors’ performances (Gere plays Edward’s arrival with outstretched arms and a

comically blissful expression) allow those who see them as constructed and somehow artificial. Once she has deconstructed the fairy-tale, the spectator will then be able to interrogate the (often conservative) assumptions that underlie the fairy-tale ending.

The fairy-tale constructed in *Pretty Woman* is also placed quite specifically within the Hollywood tradition. By setting the action literally in Hollywood, the film at once evokes a long tradition (an early sequence takes place on the Walk of Fame) and draws attention to its own status as a product of Tinseltown's "dream factory." The direct connection between the romance of *Pretty Woman* and the ephemeral, fantastic film world is perhaps most clearly evoked in a character known only as "Happy Man." "Happy Man" serves no real narrative purpose and does not interact directly with any of the main characters, but his presence and placement within the narrative are crucial to understanding this film's awareness of its own constructedness and place in the movie industry's history of fantasy-making. He appears just after the opening credits and again just before the closing credits, and in both scenes he is given similar action and dialogue. He walks down Hollywood Boulevard, greeting all those who pass with a monologue that begins with "Welcome to Hollywood! What's your dream?" Though the actor does not deliver these lines directly to the camera, his performance of the speech as directed at everyone and at no one in particular invites the spectator to understand it as directly addressed to her. This (almost) direct address can create a moment for the more critical spectator to step out of the narrative and see the romantic *mise-en-scène* as products of the Hollywood factory. From this more distant viewing position—and with the consciousness of the romance as constructed—she can begin to resist the film's more conservative representations of gender and sexual relations while still enjoying the



romance. Again, such moments operate so subtly that they may be lost on viewers who are most strongly invested in the texts' more conservative meanings. They are, however, an important way for other spectator to deconstruct the romance while still enjoying it.

Like *Pretty Woman*, *Notting Hill* announces itself as constructed by the Hollywood dream factory. *Notting Hill* also makes direct reference to Hollywood, both in the fact that Roberts's character is a major movie star (with veiled allusions to the "real" Roberts), and with more direct allusions to other real-life stars. Along with these extratextual references, the film presents a relationship that is foregrounded, both visually and through dialogue, as a simulacrum of "real life" romance. The romantic fantasy of *Notting Hill* is certainly available for the spectator to invest in, due in part to the charm of the cast and in part to its enacting of a potent fantasy—i.e., "what if that movie star I watch and admire stepped into my real life and fell in love with me?" At the same time, however, by foregrounding its extratextual elements and its romance as a constructed, postmodern object, the film allows some spectators to be of two minds—one enjoying the romance on its own terms, and the other remaining aware of that the romance is a constructed object.

*Notting Hill*'s conflation of fiction with reality can act as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the inclusion of real-life people or events gives the fiction a verisimilitude that the spectator, at least on a subconscious level, could "buy into." On the other hand, if these references are foregrounded as *deliberate* references, they can produce a jarring effect that brings the viewer out of the film enough to start questioning its assumptions. In *Notting Hill*, these moments occur first in the person of its heroine and the conflation of the fictional movie star Anna Scott and the real-life movie star Julia

Roberts, who plays Anna. Though “Julia Roberts” is never mentioned directly, a number of moments make it difficult to discern whether the character or the real-life actor is being presented. The opening montage, as we discussed earlier, is a mixture of staged shots and actual footage of Roberts at premieres and other real life functions. Such images would be familiar to most spectators, especially as our popular culture is increasingly inundated with images of stars at various “red carpet” events and these events become a source of gossip about celebrity fashion choices, behavior, and relationships. As a major star—and one with a tabloid-friendly romantic history—Roberts is a familiar subject of such gossip. The mixture of staged and archival footage, then, sets up a connection between the fictional Anna and the real-life Roberts that will be reinforced as the film progresses.

This connection is strengthened, both visually and through dialogue, in the sequence where illicit pictures of Anna surface in the tabloids. At the beginning of this sequence, the camera tracks past a newsstand full of papers with the photos—which were supposed to have been taken at least ten years earlier—printed on their front pages. The photos are—from the spectator’s viewpoint—deliberately grainy and out of focus, but they clearly bear a resemblance to the real-life Julia Roberts as she appeared about a decade earlier (around the time of *Pretty Woman*)—with longer, redder hair and a (very) few extra pounds. A conversation between Anna/Roberts and William/Hugh Grant shortly after this shot continues the conflation between character and actress. Anna first tells William how “fierce” she now is about nudity clauses, echoing Roberts’ real-life refusal to appear nude. The conversation then closes with a partially ad-libbed exchange on Mel Gibson’s bottom—Gibson both an actor with whom the real-life Robert (and the

fictional Anna) have worked and also a star known, at least early in his career, for baring his backside. Like the opening montage, this sequence can be taken as a conscious attempt to connect Roberts in the viewer's mind with her character. Though this conflation is in part a marketing gimmick—much of the film's publicity alternately teased and denied that Anna is based on Roberts—it could possibly have the added effect of allowing some spectators to be more conscious of the film's operations, and, potentially, the ideologies that underlie them.

Roberts's—and *Notting Hill's*—place within a specific pop cultural moment is foregrounded in a key scene earlier in the film. As William and Anna enjoy their first real date, they overhear a group of men comparing Anna with real-life romantic comedy star Meg Ryan. They dismiss Ryan as “too wholesome” (though they refer to her as “the one who has an orgasm every time you take her out for a cup of coffee”), while they gleefully decide that Anna is “absolutely gagging for [sex].” On one level, this conversation performs a specific narrative function. It sets the stage for William's chivalrous defense of Anna's honor (thereby revealing the extent of his feelings for her), and it also sets up the scene's punchline—Anna's disparaging remark about the size of the men's penises. On another level, however, with its references to Ryan and *When Harry Met Sally* . . . and its thinly veiled comparison of (pre marital-breakup) Ryan with the real-life Roberts, this scene situates *Notting Hill* within a particular generic context—the contemporary move toward “old fashioned” romantic comedy. By alluding to an iconic star of the genre (and, by extension, the genre itself), this exchange acts as another—again, relatively oblique—invitation to the spectator to step outside the film's

diegetic world and consider it as one of a line of products produced to evoke and fulfill her romantic fantasies.

Ultimately, the romance constructed in *Notting Hill* is a clear product of a postmodern culture where images are circulated as commodities and the relationship between reality and the image culture that portrays it becomes less clear. Jean Baudrillard writes that in our culture, "there is no longer any medium in the literal sense: it is now intangible, diffuse and diffacted in the real, and it can no longer even be said that the latter is distorted by it" ("Precession of Simulacra" 54). In postmodern image culture, Baudrillard states, "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the creation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" ("Precession" 2). The romance in *Notting Hill*, both diegetically and in the film's narrative and visual strategies, is presented as a largely "hyperreal" relationship.

In a literal sense, the love portrayed in *Notting Hill* is as much for a representation of reality as it is for than reality. Image culture drives the relationship between William and Anna—particularly William's desire for Anna—almost from the beginning. As we have already seen, the opening voice-over establishes that William has seen all of Anna's movies, suggesting that William's feelings are rooted in the *image* of Anna as much as they are in the woman herself. This suggestion is strengthened in two subsequent moments, both of which portray William watching Anna in one or another of her films. In the first scene, just after William and Anna's first encounter, William and his roommate watch one of Anna's recent movies on video, engrossed in her image and in their idea of her. (I will discuss the implications of scene they watch, a romantic point at which Anna's character receives a marriage proposal, shortly.)

In the second instance, William sits alone in a movie theater watching Anna's performance in a science fiction picture. In both scenes, Grant plays William as completely absorbed in Anna's image—his absorption further signified visually by the glow from the screen that bathes Grant's face and the reflection of the images in his eyeglasses. These shots suggest that the feelings evoked by the woman on the screen are at least as strong as those evoked by the flesh-and-blood being. The strategies used to construct Roberts's character support the notion that her character is more image than "real" person. As I have already pointed out, Anna never appears alone or without William or one of his circle. Because she does not exist on her own within the plot, she can easily be read as an image. The romance, then, can be seen as "postmodern," as the concept is defined by Frederic Jameson. It displays the "depthlessness . . . [and] relationship to a whole new technology" Jameson sees as features of postmodern culture (6). Indeed, almost any contemporary film romance could be similarly described. Most of them rely on surface signifiers and their relationship, not to "real life," but to the images of romance that have preceded them. *Notting Hill* is significant because it brings these elements to the forefront, announcing its depthlessness and constructed-ness to the spectator.

The film's consciousness of its own status as postmodern construction becomes clear in two scenes that, according to romantic comedy conventions, should be emotionally compelling moments played face-to-face between two actors. As I mentioned above, an early scene portrays William watching Anna's performance in a romance film. Grant/William's absorbed expression and William's roommate's comment on the lucky man who gets to be with Anna are meant to convey the first flush of

William's love for Anna. On one level, this scene fulfills that function. What is more interesting here, however, is that in the video clip we have an actress in a romantic comedy playing an actress playing a character in a fictionalized romance film—a notion not likely to be lost upon a spectator who has already picked up on the film's self-consciousness and tendency toward extratextual references. This moment, which is supposed to convey the beginnings of William's feelings for Anna, actually becomes part of a statement throughout the film—although admittedly one that must be teased out—that this romance (and perhaps, by extension, all film romance) is all about images and signifiers of love, rather than the real thing (whatever that may be).

The film's climax, in which William and Anna are finally united, quite literally acts out the notion of romance as a function of images. Most romantic comedies conclude with the hero and heroine professing their love for each other as they embrace, thus bringing the story to a satisfying emotional conclusion. *Notting Hill*, however, works differently. Rather than offering them in face-to-face in an intimate setting, the couple perform their declarations of love—quite fittingly—as part of a very crowded, very public press conference. The romance in this scene is not between William and Anna, but between their publicly constructed others—Anna Scott the Movie Star and A Young English Guy. This displacement is taken even further however, in that William performs in this scene as a reporter, referring to himself in the third person when asking Anna about their future.

Visually, this scene is another expression of this film's construction of contemporary romance as simulacrum. William and Anna do not touch or even come close to each other at any point in this scene. In fact, the actors do not even appear in the

same shot until a moment near end of the sequence. This brief shot, however, says everything about romance in our image culture. Rather than an embrace, we see the faces of Grant/William and Roberts/Anna, smiling next to each other—each one framed on a t.v. monitor. This sequence, like others we have examined, allows those spectators who wish to enjoy the film on two levels. It provides a pleasurable romantic payoff, even as reveals that romance to be a commodity of contemporary image culture.

The self-conscious moments examined above are certainly open to interpretation, and admittedly they may be missed by a spectator—particularly one who has wholly invested in the romance—who does not seek them out. One of the Roberts romances, however, so clearly parodies the conventions of romance and romantic comedy that its implications would be difficult to overlook. *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997) stars Roberts as a woman who learns her best friend (Dermot Mulroney) is getting married and decides to win him away from his bride-to-be. This one-sentence synopsis indicates a conservative narrative, and on a number of levels the film is just that. On another level, however, it opens the traditions of the heterosexual romance for questioning and (to an ultimately limited extent) overturning. In the extended analysis that follows, I will explore how, through shot construction, mise-en scène and casting, the film becomes a site for re-examining not only issues of gender and sexuality but also the conventions of the heterosexual romance and the Hollywood tradition that reinforces it.

As Claude Lévi-Strauss has indicated, the object of exchange in those transactions that keep culture functioning are nearly always women. He writes that “in most human societies . . . the relationship of reciprocity which is the basis of marriage is not established between men and women, but between men by means of women, who are

merely the occasion of this relationship" (116). His description of women's place in kinship exchanges leaves little room for female agency within that system:

For the woman herself is nothing other than one of these gifts, the supreme gift among those that can only be obtained in the form of reciprocal gifts . . . It should not be surprising then to find women included among reciprocal prestations, this they are in the highest degree, but at the same time as other goods, material and spiritual. (65)

Traditional patriarchal structures, then, are, in Tania Modleski's words, "a system in which women, far from being in a position to *give* the gifts *are* the gifts" (*Feminism* 48).

The position of women as objects of exchange in patriarchal culture, of course, has been criticized by numerous feminist theorists. Juliet Mitchell, for example, points out the gender divisions enforced by traditional kinship structures and the constrictive effects these divisions can have on women:

Men enter into the class-dominated structures of history while women (as women, whatever their actual work in production) remain defined by the kinship patterns of organization. In our society the kinship system is harnessed into the family—where a woman is formed in such a way that that is where she will stay. Differences of class, historical epoch, specific social situations alter the expression of femininity; but in relation to the law of the father, woman's position across the board is a comparable one. (406)

If the family and the patriarchal system that supports it continue as forces of oppression, what options are left to women and those who act outside the boundaries of compulsory heterosexuality? How can the boundaries of patriarchally-defined relationships be breached? The answer to these questions, according to some theorists, lies in re-examining the system itself.

Some critics challenge the applicability of the theories of kinship and heterosexual relations outlined by Levi-Strauss in a culture where notions like "sexuality" and "family" seem to undergo continuous re-definition. Mitchell sees these questions leading to a re-examination of the structures that have historically defined those terms:



But it seems that the definition of . . . humanity—the differentiating difference between man and beast, i.e., the development of exchange relationships, may have become ‘unsuitable’ for the particular social form in which it is today expressed . . . the next stage may be to see the contradiction between this heritage and the present way in which it is contained in the socially and ideologically reconstructed biological family. (380-381)

In her introduction to the second edition of *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* in 1999, Mitchell adds that “a return to the question of kinship . . . is to ask for an account that allows for historical change and cultural variation” (xxxii)

A number of theorists have also pointed to the constructedness of heterosexual gender relations as a space in which to re-examine those relations and perhaps create alternatives for those who operate (or wish to) outside them. “Lévi-Strauss suggests that there is no theoretical reason why women should not exchange men,” notes Mitchell (372). She adds that “empirically this has never taken place in *any* human society,” but the possibility of such a change is what is important (372). Likewise, Judith Butler asserts that kinship structures need not be as closed as they appear. “From the presupposition that one cannot—or ought not to—choose one’s closest family members as one’s lovers and marital partners,” she argues, “it does not follow that the bonds of kinship that *are* possible assume any particular form (66). If the possible forms of kinship are, as Butler states, open to so many possible permutations, “the terms of kinship become irreversibly equivocal (57)

Re-thinking patriarchally-defined gender relationships—and, for my purposes, women’s place in them—means coming up with, in Butler’s terms, “new schemes of intelligibility (24). In the popular romance narrative, this means re-working generic conventions so that they provide room for expressions of desire outside the longing for heterosexual matrimony that drives many of the traditional narratives. *My Best Friend’s*

*Wedding* is an example of an attempt to rethink these traditions. The film uses parody, intertextual references, and the positioning of its central couple to question assumptions about marriage, romance, and popular romantic conventions themselves

The film literally begins by parodying the signifiers of heterosexual romance and marriage. The title sequence pokes fun at the traditional preparation rituals of the bride on her wedding rituals. The sequence unfolds against a garish pink background reminiscent of that icon of femininity (as performance) and heterosexual romance, Barbie. Against this background, four actresses—one acting as the bride, the others as her bridesmaids—dance and lip-sync to the pop song “Wishin’ and Hopin’” as they act out the expected pre-wedding preparations of adjusting the bride’s veil, swooning over her ring, and admiring her overall beauty and purity. The stylized feel and hyper-feminized performance of actors in this sequence (they do not appear in the ensuing narrative) sets up the film’s questioning stance toward weddings, and, by extension, their foundations in an ideology of traditional heterosexual monogamy. It also raises issues of femininity and gender, particularly in light of the fact that version of “Wishin’ and Hopin’” that plays over the titles is sung by Ani DiFranco. Di Franco is a folk singer who has been labeled bisexual by the media but who is vocal about not wanting to label her sexuality or femininity. Through its stylized mise-en-scène and performances, as well as the personae of the artists involved, the opening sequence of *My Best Friend’s Wedding* highlights gender, romance and the marriage ritual as performance.

The film’s portrayal of Kimmy (Cameron Diaz), the bride in the titular wedding, continues the title sequence’s tone of over-the-top traditional womanhood as performance. As Kimmy, Diaz is a one-woman revue of over-emotional femininity run

amok. In almost every scene, she giggles gleefully, jumps up and down shrieking in joy, or cries hysterically. Visually, Diaz is also carryover from the earlier title sequence (and its implications of irony and marriage-as-performance). Her blonde, blue-eyed looks are constructed to make her the archetypal WASP princess, complete with conservatively-styled hair and pastel, preppy daughter/bride-to-be wardrobe. In keeping with Diaz's hyper-feminine performance and appearance, the character is written as having extremely traditional desires. She is willing to give up an Ivy League education and a future as an architect to follow her husband in his (undeniably masculine) job as a sports reporter. Although Kimmy is never presented as a complete object of ridicule, her deliberately excessive femininity leaves such desires, and by extension, traditional heterosexual marriage, open for the spectator to question.

The film continues to interrogate heterosexual romance in general, and the Hollywood romantic tradition in particular, by revealing the superficiality and interchangeability of their signifiers. Kimmy and Michael's relationship especially foregrounds the heterosexual romance as a set of conventions and signs. When Michael (Dermot Mulroney) describes how he proposed to Kimmy, his words evoke the most clichéd aspects of the Hollywood romance. He describes his and Kimmy's engagement as something from a movie: "The train was starting to leave, and I jumped up on the step and held the handle, and without a thought in my head, I just shouted, 'marry me!' And the train was pulling out and she just suddenly screamed, 'yes!' Just once. And blew me a kiss." These are nearly the last lines of dialogue spoken by Michael in the film, solidifying his position as the idealized heterosexual hero. His next appearance is at his and Kimmy's fairy-tale wedding.

In the sequence in which Kimmy and Michael are finally married, the film uses wedding traditions to (de)construct the heterosexual romance as a collection of signifiers. Shots of the lavish wedding are reminiscent of other Hollywood weddings; the bridal processional in particular is reminiscent of (although perhaps not quite as elaborate as) Julie Andrews's walk down the aisle in *The Sound of Music*. The scene in which the couple depart the reception continues the fairy-tale feel of the wedding.<sup>5</sup> As they drive away in a shiny white get-away car, lighted fountains spring to life along their path and romantic music plays on the soundtrack. This should be a touching, beautiful scene, and to a certain extent it is. What is romantic about these shots, however, is not the fact that these two individuals have just been married. After all, the film has not followed the development of this particular relationship and leaves little room for the spectator to invest in it emotionally. It is the *signifiers* of the happy wedding—the rice, the lights, the music—that are moving. Again, the film gives us compulsory heterosexuality and marriage as a collection of interchangeable signifiers.

The relationship between Michael and Kimmy, however, is not the only space in which *Wedding* questions the Hollywood romantic tradition that has provided so many of the clichés by which these conventions are enacted. The reunion between Julianne and Michael also plays on romantic scenes from earlier films: The two former lovers run through a crowded airport to throw themselves into each other's arms. In this case, however, the convention is referenced only to be undercut. Instead of engaging in a kiss, the two bump heads, shattering the potential for romance. This moment not only signals that the two are each other's "wrong partner," but it also places quotation marks around

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<sup>5</sup>At the reception, Julianne "lends" Michael and Kimmy a love song until they can find one of their own, emphasizing the idea of romance as a set of interchangeable signifiers.

the tropes of the popular romance. As we will see, Julianne cannot take part in the traditional, Hollywood-ized heterosexual narrative because she will become a figure in a revised notion of the film couple.

Once the film has opened notions of heterosexual romance and marriage to question, it offers alternatives for an ostensibly less oppressive system of relations. To begin with, it questions the arbitrary gender positions of heterosexual relations by making the man the object of exchange between two women. Although the story is, on the surface, about Julianne's efforts to win Michael away from Kimmy (and thus about the possibility of romance between Julianne and Michael), in many respects it is also about the negotiations between Julianne and Kimmy over who and what Michael will be—and with whom. An early scene between the two women sets up the idea of exchange, as the two catalogue Michael's bad habits and Kimmy's efforts to break him of them. They commiserate over Michael's terrible snoring, but Julianne cautions Kimmy against changing another habit, calling it a "trademark move." Dialogue at the end of this scene solidifies the notion of the as male object of exchange: Kimmy declares that despite her jealousy of Michael's history with Julianne, she has made a "command decision": Michael can have Julianne "on a pedestal," because he'll have Kimmy "in his arms."

Even more than this early scene, the final sequence between Julianne and Kimmy makes it clear that this film is not so much about the heterosexual romance as it is about women's power to decide its outcome. Although the resolution of the triangle ostensibly turns on Michael's decision (he loves Kimmy and will marry her, despite Julianne's machinations), the last word on the relationship is given to the two women. It is Julianne, not Michael, who finds Kimmy and convinces her to go through with the wedding. The

notion of female exchange and control is heightened in the final confrontation between Julianne and Kimmy, which takes place, appropriately enough, in a ladies' room as a crowd of women look on and offer commentary. This sequence, and the triangle, conclude with the females in a position of authority. After Julianne has convinced Kimmy that Julianne has "lost" Michael to her, she closes the scene with a line that sums up the issues of power and gender this triangle has explored. She exhorts Kimmy to "walk down that aisle and marry the man of our dreams."

As the film questions positions of gender within traditional patriarchy, it also offers alternative forms of love relationships outside heterosexual monogamy. This alternative is embodied in the relationship of Julianne and George, her gay best friend. (That the film presents two very different "best friend" relationships leaves the "wedding" of the title open to infinite interpretations.) Because any new form of relationship must be made, to use Butler's term, "intelligible," the relationship of George and Julianne is constructed in the context of earlier Hollywood romances. Yet, though many of their pranks and pratfalls call to mind classic screwball comedy, the two also refer to other romances that point out how slippery notions like romance, gender, and sex—and their signifiers—can be.

Perhaps the clearest connection between George and Julianne and traditional Hollywood romance—and one that most strongly conveys the irony of that tradition—is George's facetious reference to himself and Julianne as "some glittering Doris Day/Rock Hudson extravaganza." George's reference to Day and Hudson, of course, is apt on several levels. At the moment he utters the line, George, like Hudson, is also a homosexual male acting a romance with a (presumably) straight woman. The mention of

Hudson as romantic icon is meant to be a wink to the audience, given our knowledge of Hudson's real-life sexuality. As Barbara Klinger notes, "extra-filmic knowledge ultimately operates to *ironicize* sex roles." In the case of the Hudson-Day comedies, she suggests, "romance . . . appears . . . as a kind of role-playing demanded by a system that obliterates contradictions in sexual identity and defines the world heterosexually" (128).

George's allusion Rock Hudson takes on an additional layer of significance, however, when we consider that George is played by Rupert Everett. Unlike Hudson, Everett is a gay actor who is open about his sexual orientation. Despite his publicly-acknowledged sexuality, however, Everett has played both gay and straight characters throughout his career (although two of his most recent "straight" roles have been quite tongue-in-cheek performances in adaptations of Oscar Wilde, a figure who embodies questions about gender and sexuality). While Rock Hudson had to work in his performances to "obliterate" his "real" self, Everett's sexuality combines with his choice of parts to make sexuality infinitely open and ironic. This, perhaps, makes him an ideal performer for a text—and possibly a moment in history—in which definitions of sexuality and kinship are no longer clear. As David Thomson says, "Everett could take on great roles in an age that might begin to admit gender confusion—and enjoy it" (272).

Actor chemistry and the rearticulation of romantic conventions insure that Julianne and George—and the new form of relationship they represent—are the source of the film's ultimate meaning. Although it is admittedly difficult to define "chemistry", the scenes between Roberts and Everett clearly have an energy that those between Roberts and Dermot Mulroney, who plays Michael, lack. A number of factors may contribute to the difference in the two on-screen relationships, but the result is that Julianne and

George become the film's more attractive, more central couple. As the central couple, they perform many romantic conventions, most importantly the happy romantic ending. The last sequence of the film takes place at Kimmy and Michael's wedding reception, after they have departed for their honeymoon. George surprises Julianne, who has been sitting alone, and takes her in his arms for a dance. The film ends, then, as many romances do, with the central couple dancing and laughing with each other at a wedding. Yet, this couple is not based on traditional notions of gender and sexual relationships. George's final lines serve as credo for new this new form of relationship: "Maybe there won't be marriage. Maybe there won't be sex. But by God, there'll be dancing!" It should be noted that in the original version of the film, Rupert Everett did not appear in the final scene. After test audiences clamored to see George return, however, the last scene was re-written as a one for George and Julianne together. The fact that Everett had to be re-written into the end of the film indicates the charm of his performance, the appeal of his chemistry with Julia Roberts, and the power of generic conventions and expectations that demand that the "right" couple end up together in the end, regardless of sexuality or gender.

Despite its progressive presentation of romance and sexual relationships, however, *My Best Friend's Wedding* is still a product of patriarchal, mainstream Hollywood. This fact becomes especially clear when we look more closely at how the film deals with its two main female characters. Most significantly, its notions of a woman's place are reminiscent of pre-Women's Movement discourses. Real concerns over Kimmy's future are brought up several times in the film. She has agreed to quit school and follow Michael on his job as a sportswriter, but she admits she really wants to stay in school and



have a life and career of her own. Although it becomes a fairly major plot point at one moment, the conflict is left unresolved at the end of the film. Kimmy marries Michael in a lovely ceremony and presumably spends her married life following him from game to game. Any lingering doubts in Kimmy's—or the spectator's—mind are effaced in the beauty of the fairy-tale wedding ending.

Concerns about Kimmy's desires—and women's position in society—are also undercut because they are first voiced by Julianne. Despite her desperation to win Michael, Julianne is presented at the beginning of the film as a savvy, independent woman with a high-powered career of her own.<sup>6</sup> Her questions about how happy Kimmy would be giving up her own future and following Michael around are legitimate; more importantly, they are probably questions faced by many of the film's spectators. But the film undoes any progressive intent by having Julianne raise the issue, not out of consideration for Kimmy, but as part of her scheme to steal Michael. Any political import Julianne's concerns may have for this movie's spectators are diffused because they are simply the words of a scheming, jealous female. Indeed, this is not the first film to pathologize the (arguably legitimate) demands of contemporary women by placing them in the mouth of an unstable woman scorned. Nearly ten years earlier, *Fatal Attraction* (1987) virtually eliminated the progressive potential of such demands by voicing them through a literally psychotic woman<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> This idea is highlighted in an early scene in which Kimmy recites Michael's description of Jules as "not up for anything conventional or anything that's assumed to be a female priority, including romance or marriage." This description, I think, is meant to contrast favorably with the hyper-feminized Kimmy, the pastel femininity of the bridal shop in which the scene takes place, and the notions of stylized romance evoked by the theme from *A Man and a Woman* that plays over the scene.

<sup>7</sup> *Fatal Attraction* seems to be the dark, not completely articulated "other" structuring many contemporary romantic comedies. *Sleepless in Seattle*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, and *Bridget Jones's Diary* all refer

More importantly, the alternatives the film proposes fall short because, despite its arguably overt message about the fluid nature of relationships, it ultimately falls back on essentialist notions of gender and sexuality. While options within the heterosexual romance may be open as far as who takes initiative and who has the power of exchange, the straight/gay dichotomy is never questioned. Julianne and George can only provide a model for an alternative type of courtship because the possibility of a sexual relationship between the two—as least as far as it is conceived here—does not exist. George's essential homosexuality is never questioned; the possibility that he could have a sexual attraction to Julianne is never considered. This is not to say that the text is not open to queer readings (Michael, for example, could be read as a site of displacement for the unspoken desire between Julianne and Kimmy), or that spectators cannot re-cast the ending to have George and Julianne live happily ever after in the traditional sense. (When I first saw it, I wanted George to reveal that he wasn't gay and was, in fact, madly in love with Julianne.) The fact is, however, that the progressive possibilities are still performed within the paradigms of compulsory heterosexuality and fixed sexual identities.

Yet, despite its finally regressive construction of its female characters and its essentialist tendencies, *My Best Friend's Wedding* does provide a space where we can at least begin to question the assumptions that support the heterosexual romance and a patriarchally-defined system of relationships. According to Judith Butler, these spaces are particularly crucial in the age of AIDS and uncertain sexual identity:

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to it directly, and the fear of the unstable single career woman of a certain age seems to underlie many "post-feminist" romantic comedies.

This is a time in which kinship has become fragile, porous and expansive . . . What will the legacy of Oedipus be for those who are formed in these situations, where positions are hardly clear, where the place of the father is dispersed, where the place of the mother is multiply occupied or displaced, where the symbolic in its stasis no longer holds? (22-23)

Butler raises some profound issues, and few will likely be resolved in the near future.

Still, as kinship becomes more “porous and expansive,” so, hopefully will its cultural products. *My Best Friend's Wedding* makes alternative forms of relationships and courtship more intelligible by placing them the conventions of the traditional romance. In doing so, it serves as a useful model for future narratives dealing with the infinite possibilities of contemporary sexuality and gender relations.

CHAPTER 3  
WHEN DID YOU FALL IN LOVE WITH HIP-HOP?  
CONTEMPORARY BLACK ROMANTIC COMEDY

‘Romance is dead,’  
Is what they said  
While sitting around cheating at pool.  
At the very last frame  
Of this nine-ball game  
The cat who had the date  
At the top of the Empire State  
Is the one who got hustled  
Like a fool.  
--Ed (Leonard Roberts), *Love Jones*

A 1991 *Ebony* magazine article laments the lack of representations of African-American sexuality and romance on the screen. “In the still woefully segregated realm of movie . . . production, tales of love and romance . . . rarely revolve around Black characters,” the article observes. “It is as though the studios are afraid of Black love, and therefore, try either to restrict it or ignore it” (162). Six years later in *The Washington Post*, Esther Iverem continues the argument, noting “Hollywood’s continued avoidance of Black love and sexuality on the screen.” She adds that “In the thousands of film[s] that Hollywood has released, only a handful have depicted any substantial relationship between a Black man and a Black woman” (“What About Black Romance?”) Around the time Iverem’s article was being published, however, New Line Cinema released Theodore Witcher’s *Love Jones* (1997), one of the first romantic comedies to feature the relationship of a young, upwardly mobile African-American couple. Following the success of *Love Jones*, a growing body of Black romances began to emerge, including Kevin Rodney Sullivan’s *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1998) and Rick Famuyiwa’s

*Brown Sugar* (2002). Each of these films focus on the romantic relationship of an attractive African-American couple (at least one of whom possesses professional status or cultural capital), and they present scenes of romance and sex between the lovers that arguably neither avoid Black sexuality nor present it as excessive or comical (the two options to which many critics say representations of Black sexuality have been relegated in the past). These recent romances could be said to, to borrow Ed Guerrero's words, "humanize the representation of Black sexuality" by making it more visible and freeing it of the connotations of excess and danger previously associated with it (143). These depictions are crucial because, as Guerrero argues, "the depiction of Black romance and sexuality is essential to recoding Black humanity on the screen" (145). But what new forms of sexuality and subjectivity do these recent romances present? Do they present a specifically "Black" experience, if such a thing can even be defined?

I focus on the Black romances of the late 1990s primarily because they mark a moment when the idea of the Black romance begins to cohere as a genre. It is at this point, for one, that the genre begins to develop a fairly consistent set of narrative and aesthetic conventions. Each "Black romance" can be expected to feature young, attractive professionals living in a large urban center such as New York (*Brown Sugar*), Chicago (*Love Jones*) or Los Angeles (*Two Can Play That Game* (2001)). The central romance narrative often—though not always—centers on sexual jealousy, whether merited (as in *Love Jones* and *The Best Man* (1999) or not (as in *Two Can Play That Game*). The characters usually display a strong investment in specifically Black culture, which is reinforced by references to Black artists and art forms in the films' dialogue, visual elements and soundtracks. The visual design of the films ranges from bright and

energetic, as in the vibrant colors and lighting and unconventional editing of *Brown Sugar* and *The Brothers* (2001), to the more somber and conventional look of *Disappearing Acts* (2000) and *Love Jones*, but the films visual schemes are often marked with signifiers of a specific segment of African American culture, from the design of the opening credits to the Afro-centric and/or “urban” costumes worn by the characters. (I discuss this cultural investment and its significance in more detail below.)

Just as significantly, as with earlier genres such as the western and the screwball comedy, the Black romances of the late 90s begin to employ a regular set of personnel, particularly in front of the camera. Actors such as Taye Diggs (*How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, *The Wood* (1999), *The Best Man*, *Brown Sugar*), Morris Chestnut (*The Brothers*, *The Best Man*, *Two Can Play That Game*), Gabrielle Union (*The Brothers*, *Two Can Play That Game*, *Deliver Us from Eva* (2003)) and Sanaa Lathan (*Love and Basketball* (2000), *The Wood*, *The Best Man*, *Disappearing Acts*, *Brown Sugar*) have each appeared in a number of the recent films, and they could be said to form a sort of Black romantic comedy repertory company. Diggs and Lathan both have appeared in no less than five recent African-American romances (starring opposite each other in three of them), making them a sort of Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan of the genre. Such consistency is also beginning to develop in the off-camera personnel, although admittedly not as noticeably. Of the directors, Gary Hardwick, Gina Prince-Bythewood and Rick Famuyiwa have made at least two films that could be considered romantic comedies. Before *Brown Sugar*, Famuyiwa directed the ensemble nostalgia/romantic comedy *The Wood*, Prince-Bythewood helmed both *Love and Basketball* and the HBO romantic drama *Disappearing Acts*, and Gary Hardwick followed up *The Brothers* with *Deliver Us*

from *Eva*. As Black writers and directors continue to achieve more visibility and more powerful positions in Hollywood, we will undoubtedly see more films that attempt to portray “authentic” Black sexuality and experience.

Why are these representations of Black romance and sexuality so important—more specifically, why are they more significant than other aspects of Black experience? For some critics, the portrayal of romance is central to a portrayal of the whole of human experience. As Iverem notes, in screen romances “we have been given a vision of what love, and as an extension, humanity is. We’ve seen them all: average, well-meaning people . . . mob people . . . funky musicians . . . hooker as Cinderella . . . communists . . . dying people . . . elderly white people . . . even unattractive people.” Iverem points out, however, that these depictions of love—and by extension, humanity—are almost always presented through “an aesthetic of white faces,” with very few instances of well-rounded, fully developed love between Black characters (“Black Romance”). Poet Sonia Sanchez, whose work is featured in *Love Jones*, suggests that images of love and romance are central to creating a self-image capable of envisioning change. “Love stories mean people are human,” she says in an article on the film’s release. “If you want to keep people thinking they are not human, you don’t see them kissing gently, rollicking, laughing through the streets. You don’t see them in love and making love” (“Black Couples”). The romantic comedies of the past decade, then, are significant because they create a space in which to consider a more fully-rounded Black identity. The notion of “a” Black identity or an “authentic” Black experience is, of course, problematic at best. No one text can be said to represent one true, universal idea of Black identity or experience, as evidenced in the diversity of Black-produced and Black-oriented films of

the past thirty years. As we will see, however, what is important about recent Black romantic comedies is their attempt to re-cast universal concepts such as love and sexuality—as well as the history of the romantic comedy genre—within what these films present as a specifically African-American context.

Simply dropping Black characters into a romance narrative, however, does not guarantee that a film has anything significant to say about Black sexuality or subjectivity. In fact, placing Black characters in a generic text without any regard to the specificity of Black experience can often work to reinforce the existing dynamics of race and power relations that operate in the larger culture. Before the emergence of the more recent Black romances, Guerrero pointed out the dangers of making ostensibly “Black” films that in reality catered to the white power structure:

Following trends set in the 1980s, the commercial cinema system has continued to stock its productions with themes and formulas dealing with Black issues and characters that are reassuring to the sensibilities and expectations of an uneasy white audience. These filmic images tend to mediate the dysfunctions and delusions of a society unable to deal honestly with its inequalities and racial conflicts, a society that operates in a profound state of racial denial on a daily basis. Thus images are polarized into celebrations of “Buppie” successes and consumer-driven individualism that are consonant with a sense of Black political quietism, tokenism, and accommodation . . . (163)

It was not, however, only white audiences that are meant to be appeased by these “mediated images.” Theodore Witcher admits that he had specific reasons for setting *Love Jones* in the milieu that he did. “There is a political agenda,” he says of his choice to center his love story on young, upwardly mobile, culturally-attuned Black characters. He adds that his aim is “to present young African-American characters on-screen that weren’t involved in some kind of pathology” (“Black Couples”). Witcher’s political motivations are important, and *Love Jones* is a significant example of a Black text that attempts to present fully developed Black characters and relationships. Still, the desire to



“de-pathologize” representations of Black experience can result in texts that merely reinforce existing race and power dynamics. A number of African-American romantic comedies released in the past decade or so—particularly the handful of films released in the early 1990s—seem to construct assimilationist fantasies for their Black viewers in which the idea is to aspire to a certain class position that is nearly always, whether explicitly or implicitly, marked as white.

The aspirations toward a “white” class position are most strongly evident in the films of the early 1990s, which seem to suffer a hangover from the “yuppie greed” narratives of the previous decade. Kevin Hooks' *Strictly Business* (1991) and *Boomerang* (1992), starring Eddie Murphy, both play out narratives that echo white “yuppie love” comedies of the 1980s such as *The Secret of My Success* (1987). In both films, the protagonists try to find love (in both cases with a character played by Halle Berry) as they work to advance up the corporate ladder. The notion of aspiring to a specifically white class position is reinforced visually throughout *Strictly Business*. Throughout the film the lead actor, Joseph C. Williams, is often surrounded by signifiers of white corporate America, from his conservative gray suits to the white actors who play his scheming (overtly racist) colleagues, his boss, and a particularly important client (the latter two he refers to as “Mister.”)

The class ambitions portrayed in the African-American romantic comedies of the early 1990s reflect the aspirations and anxieties of a growing Black middle class. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., notes, “by 1990, the Black middle class . . . had never been larger, more prosperous, or more secure” (1998). The Black middle class that had formed by the 1990s was not only stronger than it had been previously, but according to some critics it

had to deal with a new set of concerns. “The Black middle class has gone from being a small but committed group, which fought for racial justice and civil rights,” argues Charles T. Banner-Haley, “to a much larger group currently grappling with the effects of integration and increased professionalization, and with new issues of racial identity” (xxi). These questions, as Gates points out, often find their way into Black cultural production of the time.

The politics of Black identity, and the determined quest to reconcile upward mobility with cultural ‘authenticity’ is a central preoccupation of [Black films of the 1990s]. If genuine Black culture is the culture of the streets, a point on which blaxploitation films were clear, how can you climb the corporate ladder without being a traitor to your race? (qtd “Musing New Hoods”)

The tension between class aspiration and the desire to maintain an “authentic” cultural identity is addressed in several early 1990s romantic comedies, albeit in an ultimately unsatisfactory manner.

It is true that, at least on the surface, the protagonists of both *Strictly Business* and *Boomerang* do end up getting in touch with their “authentic” cultural roots, primarily through their relationship with the Halle Berry character. In *Boomerang*, Berry teaches an Afrocentric art class to young inner-city children and begins to show Murphy the importance of fidelity to his cultural heritage. In *Strictly Business*, Phillips’s character’s relationship with Berry’s character allows him to loosen up and discover what is presented as his essential urban, “Black” side. He begins to dress in the bright colors that signified a particular style of African-American fashions in the early 90s, and he starts frequenting urban dance clubs. In both of these films, however, the nod to Black authenticity is all but superficial, and the attractiveness of a white class position is still reinforced. At the ends of both narratives, the protagonists still have their jobs in the (primarily white) corporate structure. The assimilation fantasy of *Strictly Business*, for

example, is further reinforced at the end of the film when the Phillips character even helps a younger, more “urban” co-worker (Tommy Davidson) learn to look and behave less “street,” thereby insuring that young man’s eventual progress up the corporate ladder.

Though some of the films that began to emerge at the end of the 1990s still construct assimilation fantasies (the protagonists of *Two Can Play That Game*, as I discuss below, are both firmly entrenched in the white-dominated capitalist corporate structure), a number of them attempt to evade such fantasies. The protagonists of films like *Love Jones* and *Brown Sugar* could still be considered upwardly mobile—indeed, in some cases they have already achieved the signifiers of social and material success. Many of them, however, have achieved this success, not in a white-dominated corporate structure, but in fields based in Black culture and run by Blacks—for example, the hip-hop industry portrayed in *Brown Sugar*. More importantly, what these films seem to value more than financial or material achievement is the acquisition of African-American cultural capital—knowledge of, or better yet, involvement in the creation of, Black music, literature, or art. By shifting the terms of success and upward mobility from economic and material achievement to cultural investment, the more recent romantic comedies manage a (tentative) reconciliation between a certain kind of class position and the expression of an authentic Black identity. Even this formation, however, is an idealized one, as few Black romances since the late 1990s have portrayed relationships between poor or working-class characters (*Disappearing Acts* is one of the few recent romances to do so, and I discuss it below.) Not only do they evade dealing with the anxieties of upwardly mobile Black Americans, then, but many recent Black romances manage to avoid grappling with the problems that stem from the “extended

impoverishment” of a “large . . . Black underclass” (Gates 1998). When the world of this “Black underclass” does appear, it is often used for comic effect, as in the fact that *The Brothers*’s Brian, an upwardly-mobile attorney, still lives in the lower-income, crime-ridden ‘hood in which he grew up.

Even as the genre began to develop an identity of its own in the later part of the decade, some of the films still conveyed a sense of aspiring to a universal “white” norm, not only economically and socially, but also sexually. The connections between romance and “whiteness” are perhaps spelled out most clearly in Rusty Cundieff’s *Sprung* (1997). The film creates a narrative and visual dichotomy between its two central couples, Brandy (Tisha Campbell) and Montel (Cundieff), and Adina (Paula Jai Parker) and Clyde (Joe Torry). From the start, the difference between the two couples is clear: Brandy and Montel are sweet, principled aspiring professionals (she’s a paralegal, he’s a photographer and aspiring filmmaker) who seem to want true love. By contrast, Clyde is the wanna-be “playa” who lies about his financial status to get women into bed and Adina is presented as a stereotypical gold-digging “ghetto queen.”

The narrative differences between the “good” couple and the “bad” couple are reinforced—and clearly connected to issues of race—in the film’s visual elements and soundtrack, beginning with the casting of the two couples. The more traditional couple is portrayed by the significantly more light-skinned Cundieff and Campbell, setting them in contrast to the more scheming couple played by the darker-skinned Parker and Torry. Just in case the film’s championing of “white” form of sexual expression is not clear, the sexual encounters each couple experiences reinforce blackness and black sexuality as inferior to the whiteness to which the characters—and by extension the spectator(s)—are

expected to aspire. Montel and Brandy's first real encounter is shot with even lighting and soft focus, as traditional romantic music plays on the soundtrack. Adina and Clyde's first sexual encounter, on the other hand, is presented with lurid lighting and color tones, over-the-top performances, and a soundtrack that signifies both the jungle and primal sexuality, signifiers of racist constructions of black sexuality. Despite being written and directed by an African-American filmmaker, this scene enacts the traditional Hollywood construction of Black sexuality described by Guerrero when he writes that

Hollywood has depicted [Black sexuality] in the most distorted and perverse terms and images . . . in the broadest sense, all of these narrative strategies and modes of Black representation and subordination construct the Black body as the object of the "look" for the pleasure of the dominant spectator. (238)

While *Sprung* is definitely a step toward a positive representation of Black romance, the film's portrayal of the Clyde/Adina pairing shows that elements of these "distorted and perverse" depictions still exist, if only to function as comic relief. Such depictions of sexuality are especially important in terms of how these films construct Black female sexuality and present it to their Black female viewers—a concern I address below.

The problematic portrayals of Black sexuality and identity continue in some of the romantic comedies of the new millennium, particularly Mark Brown's *Two can Play That Game* (2001). While ostensibly a "battle of the sexes" comedy about the relationship between two attractive, well-to-do Los Angeles professionals (Vivica A. Fox and Morris Chestnut), the film mobilizes a number of racial stereotypes and employs visual and narrative strategies that ultimately end up addressing a predominately white spectator position. The film's heroine, Shante (Fox), is an executive at a large marketing firm, and is proud of being twenty-eight and the only "sister" in the boardroom. In a monologue addressed directly to the spectator, she points out that she is a "strong Black woman" who

“knows where she’s going and hasn’t forgotten where she came from.” Likewise, Keith (Chestnut) is an “accomplished” lawyer, as we learn both from another of Shante’s monologues and from a montage of newspaper clippings and awards signifying Keith’s achievements. Keith’s professional status is further reinforced in a scene in which he is shown conferring with—and issuing instructions to—several presumably junior white colleagues.

The presence of two attractive, successful, Black professionals on the screen is significant, and on its surface the film conveys a sense of pride and an investment in such progressive portrayals. But even as it is careful to present its characters in such a positive light, it undercuts these portrayals by simultaneously reinforcing the construction of blackness as both comedy and excess. Both Shante and Keith are given sidekicks that draw on popular images of the ghetto queen and on even older traditions of minstrelsy. Shante’s friend Deirdre (Mo’nique) can be described in, as Shante puts it, “two words: Ghetto. Fabulous.” The first shot of Deirdre in the film comes immediately after Shante’s words and highlights the truth in this description. When Deirdre’s “broke-ass” (as she puts it) boyfriend asks her to lend him money during a card game, the camera cuts to a comically tight close-up of Mo’nique/Deirdre’s (somewhat overweight, arguably over-made-up) face as she slowly chews her gum and fixes her boyfriend with a steely glare, drawling, “Hell. No.” Deirdre’s “ghetto” tendencies are further showcased in a scene near the end of the film. At a professional function involving Keith and Shante, Deirdre disdains the hors d’oeuvres as “white people’s food” and threatens to start a fight with a group of women who are flirting with Keith.

Keith's friend Tony (Anthony Anderson) similarly serves as a minstrel or fool figure. Anderson's performance is a combination of frenetic movement, high-pitched, slang-filled exclamations and continuous mugging. While the performance never quite reaches the eye-rolling and foot-shuffling of Amos 'n Andy or the Sambo figure, Tony can be read as an updated, more materially successful variation on those characters. This is especially significant considering that Anderson's character is also a presumably successful professional (he is an attorney in the same firm as Keith). It could be argued that both Deirdre and Tony act as foils to foreground progressive aspects of the more polished, professional central couple—and indeed, on one level they do perform such a function. The fact that such representations persist, however, particularly in a text that so carefully pays lip service to the achievements of its main characters, betrays the problematic racial politics—or at least anxieties over Black upward mobility—at the film's heart.

In fact, on at least one level *Two Can Play That Game* does not address the aspirations of its Black viewers as much as it speaks to the anxieties—and perhaps latent racist tendencies—of an imagined white audience. The film consistently uses Shante's direct address to the camera, and these moments are usually geared toward an imagined Black “girlfriend” who can relate to Shante's situation. In a scene where she goes to counsel a girlfriend who thinks her boyfriend is cheating on her, however, the address arguably shifts to a white spectator. As Shante enters the boyfriend's apartment building, the loud, somewhat violent confrontation between the couple can be heard off-camera. At the sound of the fight, Shante/Fox turns to the camera and says, “Now, why must Black people and Mexicans make so much noise in white people's apartment buildings?”

Though Fox's delivery of this dialogue—and a subsequent line about hating having said it—indicate that the comment is meant as a joke (presumably about the complaints of prejudiced whites about their neighbors of color), the rest of the scene raises questions about the object of this joke and its intended audience. As Shante enters the apartment and comments on the argument, Shante/Fox is placed in the foreground of the shot facing the camera while the actors playing the fighting couple, Tamala Jones and Dondre Whitfield, continue acting out the argument in the background. The effect is to position Shante as a t.v. reporter on the scene of an altercation—or, even more problematically, as a commentator in an ethnographic film on the mating rituals of some primitive, exotic culture. This moment—and perhaps, by extension, the entire film—becomes a discourse for an outside (presumably white) audience on the excessive, often comic rituals of Black gender relationships.

Based on these examples, then, it becomes clear that representations of Black romance and sexuality still have far to go, even as the genre begins to come into its own. However, when we view them through a different lens, we can see that a number of recent African-American romances attempt to tell love stories that are clearly rooted in (at least one version of) the African-American experience. Gladstone Yearwood's concept of Afrocentric film criticism provides a useful tool with which to examine such films. Yearwood argues that in order to truly comprehend how a Black film might speak to its spectators, we must move away from the idea of (white) mainstream Hollywood as the universal standard against which every other type of film-making is assessed. He writes that

When we examine Black film from a perspective informed by Afrocentrism, we can dismiss attempts to establish Hollywood films as the yardstick against which



all others are measured . . . . Instead of viewing Black film as a poor imitation of Hollywood, an Afrocentric stance locates Black film within a long history of cultural expression, refusing to see Black film as a deviant cultural product. (10)

Yearwood's theory of Afrocentric criticism is a particularly productive tool with which to examine recent Black romantic comedies, particularly as they draw on—and at the same time seem to resist the influence of—traditional “white” Hollywood romances. “It is not that Hollywood is irrelevant to Black filmmaking,” he writes, “but rather Afrocentric film theory suggests that the Black experience functions as a more fundamental layer of signification in understanding Black film” (8). Perhaps the most significant way the Black romances that began to emerge in the late 1990s express the importance of this Black experience is by conveying the sense that the romance develops—and its story is told—on its own terms, independent of the white power structure. These are some of the first arguably mainstream movies to at least attempt to discuss Black sexuality and romance *as a Black experience*, without—at least not directly—placing it against or in reaction to a monolithic white reality. In the recent romances, white culture has been all but marginalized and plays little or no part in the narrative development of the central relationship.

In a number of films, for example, the conflicts in the central romance come, not from the outside, from the larger white structures in which these characters still must operate, but from the characters' relationships with each other and their attempts to live as gendered subjects in contemporary Black culture. The jealousies and anxieties portrayed in films like *Love Jones* and *The Brothers* reflect part of what Bakari Kitwana describes as “the escalating tensions between young Black men and women” at the turn of the millennium (xx). Among the sources for these tensions, according to Kitwana, are “the persistence of old attitudes about gender roles, rooted deep in American and Black

cultures and strongly shaped by popular culture and Judeo-Christian ethics," all of which have "helped breed cynicism between young Black men and women" (92). The relationship between Jack and Denise in *The Brothers*, for example, is threatened because of Jack's jealousy when he learns that Denise once dated his father, a charmer who left Jack's mother years earlier and seems to have a fondness for younger women. (These tensions are exacerbated by the clearly Oedipal dynamics of Jack's family: Jack still resents his father for leaving the family and is over-protective of his mother, particularly as regards her on-again, off-again sexual relationship with Jack's father.) It does not matter that Denise claims she never had sex with Jack's father. She has already proven herself a potential "slut puppy" (a term she jokingly uses in an earlier scene) by sleeping with Jack the first time she meets him, and the reality of her (quasi-)sexual past is almost impossible for Jack to accept.

The conflict over Denise's sexuality exemplifies an attitude that pervades a number of contemporary African-American romances, namely the good girl/"ho" dichotomy of Black female sexuality. Dre (Taye Diggs) sums up this dichotomy early in *Brown Sugar*: "You know, we all looking for wifey material, a woman that's fine, smart, classy, but not a snob. You know, hell-a-hella sexy, but not a ho." He then goes on to contrast this classy, sexy (but not a 'ho) woman with "the girls in the music videos," who flaunt their cleavage and have "their booties hanging out of their skirts." In an early scene of male bonding and trash-talking, the four buddies in *The Best Man* put this distinction even more succinctly, agreeing that every man wants the "consummate mother/whore." While these values arguably exist in a number of cultures (including the larger contemporary American culture), this view seems particularly pertinent in an African-American

context, given the tension between that culture's roots in religious and sexual conservatism and the history of the (over)sexualized Black female in both Black and the larger popular culture. (I discuss how these representations of Black female sexuality specifically address female spectators below.)

The relationships portrayed in some recent Black romantic comedies also play out what Delores P. Aldridge calls "the game-playing strategies used in Black male-female relationships" (60). Following a number of studies from the 1970s and 80s, Aldridge argues that the "games of love" and "games of power" that Black men and women play with each other are a result of "childhood socialization into game playing," and have "destructive" effects on "courtship, marriage, and relationships between Black males and females" (59, 60). Such effects are most evident in the aptly titled *Two Can Play That Game*, but they also operate more subtly in the relationship between Nina and Darius in *Love Jones*, a relationship that is set up from the beginning as a "game" (he uses a variety of schemes and ploys in his pursuit of her; she plays hard-to-get despite her obvious interest). The idea of game-playing is explored when Nina, in an effort to gauge Darius's commitment to their relationship, tells Darius she is going to New York to spend time with her former fiancé. Darius, who admits elsewhere that he ruined an earlier relationship by trying to be a "player," plays his own game in response and reacts nonchalantly to the news. Their mutual games prove to be destructive to the romance, causing a rift that takes over a year (within the diegesis) to heal. It could be argued that the problems between Darius and Nina are internal and can be ascribed to the psychological make-up of individual characters. Read within a larger context, however,

the film reflects the dynamics identified by some critics in the specific experience of contemporary Black male-female relationships.

More importantly, the conflicts in many contemporary Black romances are portrayed as arising out of Black social dynamics, not—at least not overtly—out of the constraints the white power structure still exerts on Black culture. The main conflict between Nina and Darius in *Love Jones*, for example, is not whether Nina's photography will ever be accepted by white editors, or whether Darius's novel will reach a white audience. This is not to say that the white power structure is not still (at least peripherally) present in these films, or that it does not occasionally have a direct narrative impact. In *Love Jones*, representatives of white patriarchal power do show up in the form of the white males who do criticize Nina's photography. Yet, though these encounters are portrayed as frustrating—and as rooted in the long relationship of race, power and culture in America—they are not shown to have any real impact on the film's central romantic relationship. (I say this with the understanding that many of the tensions in contemporary Black gender relations *do* result, at least in part, from the larger history of race relations in the U. S.)

In at least one recent African-American romance, however, the white power structure is portrayed as having a significant impact on the developing relationship of the film's central couple. *Disappearing Acts*, based on the novel by Terry McMillan, tells the story of Franklin, a construction worker who never finished high school, and Zora, a music teacher and aspiring singer. While the relationship is portrayed as beginning fairly smoothly, trouble soon arises when Franklin has problems getting steady work. He is constantly laid off by his white boss, often in favor of the boss's relatives. The racial

aspects of Franklin's situation are highlighted in dialogue and scenes that show Franklin's difficulty getting hired for (predominantly white) union jobs. Franklin's depression over his continuing unemployment eventually causes a rift in his relationship with Zora, who struggles to work, keep up her dream of writing and recording her own music, and care for their newborn child, and the couple eventually split up. On one level, then, *Disappearing Acts* connects the problems in relations between Black men and women to the continuing underrepresentation of Black Americans—particularly Black men—in the institutions that drive economic and social mobility. As Aldridge argues, “institutional racism and sexism [can be seen as] primary motivators in the difficulties that define some Black male-female relationships” (33). The tensions portrayed between Franklin and Zora illustrate what Aldridge calls “the Black male-female conflict [that] is a function of America's capitalistic tradition and the historic subjugation of Black people” (34).

On another level, however, the dialogue and the performances in *Disappearing Acts* allow for a reading in which such outside influences are merely an excuse, and the real problem in this relationship is to be found in the characters' emotional and psychological make-up. From the beginning, Franklin's problems keeping employment are attributed more to his own quick temper and irresponsibility than they are to the fact that he is a Black worker trying to function in a labor force controlled by whites. When Franklin's boss (who, while not portrayed as sympathetic, is nonetheless not overtly racist) lays Franklin off one too many times, Franklin responds by telling him never to call him again, thereby removing at least one potential source of employment. When he does finally get a union job, he does indeed face the racist taunts of some of his white co-

workers. But again, his white foreman is portrayed as treating him fairly and wanting Franklin to succeed. The ultimate loss of Franklin's union job stems, not from racism or outside oppression, but from his own (arguably irresponsible) decision to drink on the job.

Likewise, while the tensions between Franklin and Zora do come from his stress over his employment situation, this stress can also be read as self-inflicted. Wesley Snipes's performance of Franklin, particularly after Franklin has lost the union job, conveys, not a man struggling against systematic racism and oppression, but one who is bound by his own internal conflicts. In a scene before Franklin and Zora's major breakup, Franklin lounges on the sofa, drinking one of many beers, and speaking in a tone that conveys both immaturity and self-pity. While this portrayal of Black masculinity is certainly problematic on other levels, what is important for my purposes here is that the film moves away from constructing a monolithic white world against which the characters must struggle and makes the story one of Black relationships and Black experience. This point is reinforced in the closing scene. A year or so after their breakup, Franklin comes to visit Zora and their child. He reveals that he has completed his G.E.D. and is applying for his contractor's license. Zora is pleased with this news, and the two discuss how the problems in their relationship arose because they both weren't ready—they both just needed to get their acts together. The film ends with the two sitting together in Zora's living room, a reunion implied but not definite. The love story in *Disappearing Acts*, while never completely removed from the social and economic realities of working-class African-Americans, gives its characters agency and the ability to develop a relationship independent of these factors.

Compare this to an earlier African-American romance that is set clearly within the Black struggle against the white power structure. In *Claudine*, the development of the romance is almost literally dictated by the couple's relationship to white-controlled social and economic institutions. Released in 1974, *Claudine* chronicles the romance between a single mother trying to raise six children on welfare and the wages she makes as a maid, and a garbage collector who must make his small salary stretch to pay child support to two children from previous relationships. The relationship between the two characters is presented from the start as free of any internal conflict that would seriously pose a threat to the romance. Claudine (Diahnn Cannon) and Roop (James Earl Jones) are instantly attracted to each other and soon find out they are sexually and emotionally compatible. Cannon and Jones have a comfortable chemistry that makes the relationship even more believable. Moreover, even the presence of Claudine's children does not prove to be an obstacle for the couple. Roop soon wins over some, if not all, of Claudine's more skeptical children and eventually becomes a part of the household, eventually becoming so fully a part of the family that Claudine's children even throw him a Father's Day party.

The biggest obstacle in *Claudine* comes, not from internal or familial tensions, but from the demands of the white-run institutions that exert control over the lives of poor and working-class African-Americans. These institutions are represented most clearly in the form of social workers that seem to haunt Claudine's life from the beginning of the film. In fact, her fear of the welfare office caseworkers who keep track of almost every aspect of her life is foregrounded in her relationship with Roop from the beginning. In their first meeting, Roop teases Claudine that she'll go out with him if only to keep him from revealing that she has a job, which is against regulations for those receiving welfare.

As the romance progresses, Claudine must hide the signifiers of the relationship—in this case the gifts and items Roop has bought for the family—from the welfare caseworker, since such items also put her eligibility to receive benefits in jeopardy. (At one point she must hide Roop himself, who happens to be in the apartment during one of the caseworker's unannounced visits.)

The difficulties of marginalized figures trying to form a committed relationship in the face of an overwhelming bureaucracy are expressed most clearly in a scene where Roop and Claudine visit Social Services to find out how her welfare benefits and his income would be affected if they were to marry. After two social workers (one of whom, ironically, is Black) explain the almost impossible logistics involved in such a scenario, Roop becomes outraged. "You force a man out of the house because it ain't worth the crap you gotta go through," he cries, no doubt voicing the frustrations of many in the same position. *Claudine*, then, like the "blaxpoitation" films released around the same time, consciously constructs Black love and sexuality in response to the oppressive structures that continued to direct the lives of African-Americans into the 1970s.

Turning back to the idea of Afrocentric criticism, however, we see that a number of contemporary Black romances employ a number of additional strategies in order to situate their love stories as particularly Black love stories. One of the primary ways they accomplish this is to present these stories and characters as involved in a history of African-American cultural production, including Black music and art. By doing so they add, to borrow Yearwood's phrase, a "fundamental layer of signification" to what are essentially generic texts. This signification is performed in a number of ways. On a narrative level, as I have already mentioned, contemporary Black romances are



particularly interested in presenting characters with a strong investment with specifically Black culture. This investment may be acted out, firstly, in the characters' professional activities. Montel in *Sprung*, for example, has aspirations of making a Black-oriented romance film. Likewise, *Strictly Business*, despite its unmistakably problematic racial and class politics, also ends with an investment in Black culture and history—in this case, the investment is literal. When Waymon (Williams) is about to jeopardize an important deal—and by extension his professional future—salvation comes in the form of a deal with the Black-owned Harlem National Bank. In this way the overtly racist ideology of the film is at least partly over-ridden by this nod toward Black economic freedom and entrepreneurship. Even if their professions do not involve them in issues of the Black experience in a direct way, the characters in these films still often exhibit strong interests in Black culture, including music (in *Love Jones*, Nina and Darius bond over a shared love of Charlie Parker and jazz in general) and literature (*Disappearing Acts*'s Zora is named after the African-American novelist Zora Neale Hurston).

One of the recent films to situate its romance most clearly within Black culture is Rick Famuyiwa's *Brown Sugar*. Here, the history of a relatively new African-American art form, hip-hop, is tied narratively and stylistically to the development of the film's central romance. The film connects the relationship of the main couple, Dre and Sidney, to the world of hip-hop in a number of significant ways. First, the beginning sets out the terms on which the love story will be told. The opening sequence features, not one of the main characters, but a series of real-life rappers and hip-hop performers from throughout the form's history, such as Big Daddy Kane, Common and Treach, answering the question: "When did you fall in love with hip-hop?" This sequence helps establish at the

outset that this love story will be rooted in a specifically Black experience and cultural history. Hip-hop will become the means by which Dre and Sidney construct their own identities and the way they relate to each other, both personally and professionally.

After this documentary-style opening, the first scene in the film establishes the connection between hip-hop and the central romance. As the film cuts to a scene set in mid-1980s South Bronx, a young girl (clearly an adolescent Sidney) walks through the urban setting, past break dancers and other signifiers of Black culture of the era, to a space where three rappers perform for a gathering crowd. As Sidney tries to watch the performance through the crowd, a boy (a young Dre) beckons her to a better viewing spot. On the soundtrack, the adult Sidney says, "I can remember the exact day I fell in love with hip-hop." The voice-over further establishes a specific date for this scene: July 18, 1984 (the date reinforced in a title appearing on the screen at the same moment). Indeed, the performance Sidney and Dre watch is not just any impromptu rap performance, but the historic Battle in the Bronx, the site of the first meeting of Slick Rick, Doug E. Fresh and Dana Dane. The first meeting of the central couple, then, is clearly set in an important moment of a specific form of Black artistic expression, rooting the romance in a larger cultural history. The interplay of visuals and soundtrack in this scene, along with the long-established romantic comedy conventions that allow us immediately understand the scene as an important moment between the film's lovers, clearly set up the relationship of cultural investment to romantic love that will be explored through the rest of the film.

In *Brown Sugar*, an investment in hip-hop becomes the marker of the right romantic partner and, by extension, authentic Black romance and identity. Near the

beginning of the film, Dre is stuck in a life that, while it is never explicitly stated, conflicts with his desire to live an authentic Black identity. To begin with, he works as an executive at an urban music label where the drive for profits outstrips fidelity to cultural identity. (His boss hires a comically inept Black/white rap duo and gleefully has them record "That Ho is Mine," a hip-hop remake of the Michael Jackson/Paul McCartney duet "The Girl is Mine.") In addition, early in the film, Dre marries Reese, an upwardly-mobile entertainment lawyer. Reese is marked as nearly white, both in the actress's appearance (Nicole Ari Parker has fair skin and blue/green eyes, and for this role her hair is straightened and lightened to a light auburn/dark reddish blonde) and in the character's circle of white and light-skinned upper-class girlfriends. The couple's apartment is a sleek, silver-and-white set that signifies their upward mobility but bears hardly any trace of the cultural history so important to the film and its central characters. Similarly, while Sidney's profession and lifestyle are arguably more "authentic" (she works for a major hip-hop magazine and lives, not in Manhattan, but in the old neighborhood), she is also given an unsuitable love interest. Her fiancé, a basketball-player-turned-aspiring-rapper, is portrayed as having no real understanding of hip-hop or Sidney's love for it. In a moment that shows just how wrong he is for Sidney, he admits that he's read her review of his own CD, but none of her other writing on the form.

When Dre quits his "sell-out" job at the big label in order to start his own company and produce "the real, real hip-hop," it is Sidney, not Reese who supports him. Sidney is the first person Dre tells about his career move, and she is his first—and as far as we see on the screen, his only—investor. Sidney provides not only financial support for Dre's new enterprise, but is there for the actual day-to-day work, including recording sessions

with the new label's first and only artist, Cavi (played by real-life rapper Mos Def). Reese, on the other hand, has no interest in or patience with Dre's dream (she calls it "this hip-hop thing") and ultimately ends up leaving him.

Sidney and Dre are so connected by their investment in this primarily Black form, and the romance narrative so intimately entwined with the narrative of hip-hop's development, that by the end of the film any mention of their love for hip-hop is inextricably connected to talk of their love for each other. In the film's final scene (in many other respects a conventional romantic climax), Dre asks Sidney the question that has been repeated throughout the film: "When did you fall in love with hip-hop?" At this moment, however, it is clear that Dre is not referring only to the music but to his relationship with Sidney. Sidney responds in a way that reinforces this connection, saying, "Dre, I fell in love with you the first time I saw you." By affirming a commitment to African-American culture and the importance of cultural identity in subjectivity and sexual relationships, this scene takes what would otherwise be a romantic comedy cliché and places it within a specifically Black experience.

The same investments in African-American culture are also clear in *Love Jones*. Like *Brown Sugar*, this film opens by deliberately evoking a specific form of Black cultural production—in this case, the photography of Gordon Parks. The opening shots of the film are stark, yet beautifully photographed images of Black urban life, including weathered storefronts, children playing on concrete play grounds, and an elderly man sitting on a park bench. These images, which are understood to be the work of Nina, the film's heroine, evoke Parks's photographs "Ella Watson and her Grandchildren" (1942) and "Norman, Jr. Reading in Bed" (1955) ([masters-of-photography.com](http://masters-of-photography.com)). The

connection is made specific a few scenes later when Darius, Nina's intended love interest, flips through a portfolio of Nina's photos and compares them to Parks's.

As in *Brown Sugar*, a shared interest in Black culture also serves as the bond that brings *Love Jones*'s main couple together. Darius courts Nina, first by reciting a specifically African-American poem (which I discuss below), and later by playing her a Charlie Parker tune when they run into each other in a record store. Darius's knowledge of Black poetry, music and photography amuses Nina, even as it impresses her. "You're just a Renaissance Black man, aren't you?" she jokes early on. The connections between African-American culture and Black sexuality are drawn even more clearly in a scene that occurs late in the film. Darius and Nina have broken up, but are tentatively trying to rebuild some sort of relationship. After a late night out, they return to Nina's apartment to sleep—Nina in her bed upstairs, Darius on the couch downstairs. The sexual tension between them is so palpable, however, that neither can sleep and Darius finally asks Nina if he can play her a song (an echo of their earlier encounter in the record store). As the John Coltrane/Duke Ellington recording of "In a Sentimental Mood" comes on the soundtrack, Darius and Nina move into each other's arms. Shots of this moment book-end a montage of the couple in various romantic settings, including chasing each-other through a green, rain-soaked park. The play of these romantic signifiers with the soundtrack of a uniquely African-American musical form takes what otherwise would be a standard romantic scene and makes the moment readable within a specifically Black context.

*Love Jones*, however, goes further than many other contemporary Black romances by constructing a literal space in which Black subjectivity and Black romance can be

performed. The characters spend a significant portion of the narrative at a club—aptly named “The Sanctuary”—which is specifically devoted to performances of Black music and poetry. The Sanctuary set is warmly, if dimly lit, and all of the scenes that take place there are accompanied by a soundtrack of soft jazz or low voices performing poetry about love, unity and the Black experience. That this is an exclusively Black space is further foregrounded by the figures shown inhabiting the club. Nearly all of the faces on the screen during the Sanctuary scenes are clearly marked as African-American, and many of the actors wear Afrocentric clothing and hairstyles. The setting reflects a small but vibrant “Black bohemia,” which a 1997 *Newsweek* article characterizes as a “more reflective, alternative” part of the larger hip-hop culture. The movement “isn’t about posturing or trying to fit a mold,” says one performer interviewed in the article. “It’s about self-love and uplifting the race” (“Rebirth of the Cool”).

More importantly for our purposes here, two of the most significant moments in the film’s romantic narrative take place in this specifically Black setting. First, it is the space in which Darius and Nina first encounter each other—a typical romantic comedy “meet cute” where Darius fumbles his attempt to be smooth and Nina uses humor to hide her attraction to him. Sanctuary is also the setting for the (presumably final) romantic reunion between the two lovers. After a year away, Nina returns to Chicago and heads to The Sanctuary in hopes of seeing Darius again. She goes onstage and recites a poem that obliquely states her feelings, but, thinking Darius is not there, she walks out immediately afterward. She is followed out of the club by Darius, who has seen her performance, and the two make up as the rain pours down (another romantic convention) and the neon “Sanctuary” sign glows prominently in the shot. In this final scene, *Love Jones* situates

Black romance and sexuality as part of a larger celebration of African-American culture and identity.

Though they represent an attempt at more positive and culturally specific representations of Black sexuality, many African-American romances ultimately construct fantasies of reconciliation in which the tensions between the characters (many of them based on issues and anxieties that pervade the larger Black culture) are too easily resolved. These resolutions, are often presented without working through—or in many cases even addressing—the larger issues from which the problems arose in the first place. In *The Brothers*, for example, Jack and Denise are reunited (at his parents' re-marriage ceremony, no less) after they decide to forgive each other, with no discussion of the forces that shape Jack's view of Denise's sexuality (or Black female sexuality in general), or even any evidence that either have thought through these issues. In an even more glaring example of the way the film papers over relationship conflicts based in larger social dynamics, another female who just a scene before had been seen shooting at her fiancé for calling off their wedding is shown happily reunited and snuggling with said fiancé at Jack's parents' wedding. This resolution comes without any real acknowledgment of the social or cultural factors that impede intimacy in contemporary Black relationships, or of the violence that occurs in many sexual relationships, whatever the ethnic or racial identity of the couple.

Despite this investment in Black experience and culture, and despite their conscious construction of their love stories as Black love stories, there still remains a sense that contemporary African-American romances must contend with their relationship to white (popular) culture in general and white film history in particular. The

specter of white film history—and white romantic comedy specifically—hovers over a number of these films in both direct and oblique ways, evoking—to borrow Harold Bloom’s phrase—an “anxiety of influence” toward their white predecessors. Earlier Hollywood romances are cited directly in several of the Black films. In *Two Can Play that Game*, for example, Karen, who is having problems getting her boyfriend to commit to marriage, breaks into tears while watching the scene in the Cary Grant/Katharine Hepburn romantic comedy *Holiday* (1938) in which Grant’s character begs his fiancée to marry him immediately. In addition, several particularly funny moments in *Brown Sugar* arise from Chris’s (Mos Def) riff on the similarities between Sidney and Dre’s relationship and those of the characters in *Casablanca* (1942). Chris compares Dre to Humphrey Bogart and himself to Peter Lorre (not, interestingly, to Claude Rains—he jokes that he’s not walking off into the foggy night with “another dude”).

*Brown Sugar* also bears strong narrative—and occasionally visual—similarities to a more recent Hollywood romantic comedy, Rob Reiner’s *When Harry Met Sally . . .* (1989). Like the earlier film, *Brown Sugar* is the story of two long-time best friends who can’t seem to admit their true feelings for each other until the end of the film. Just as Harry and Sally are given sidekicks to comment on their relationship, Chris and Francine (Queen Latifa) provide commentary and comic relief to the Dre/Sidney romance—and like Jess and Marie in the earlier film, they end up together at the end of the story. In addition to these narrative similarities, *Brown Sugar* also recreates the visual aspects of some of *When Harry Met Sally . . .*’s more popular images. A wide-angle long take of Sidney and Dre walking through Central Park discussing male/female relationships, for



example, evokes the look of a similar moment in *Harry* where the two leads walk through Central Park discussing their break-ups and the New York real estate market.

Of course, reference to earlier works is nothing new in contemporary texts, even in romantic comedy. *When Harry Met Sally* . . . draws heavily on Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977), and *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* (2003) cites *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), which draws much of its emotional tenor—and its climactic Empire State Building scene—from *An Affair to Remember* (1958), itself a remake of an earlier Hollywood romance. When Black films cite earlier white texts, however, the terms become more complex. On one level, these citations can be read as constructing white Hollywood as, to go back to Yearwood's words, the "yardstick" against which these films are measured and positioning the Black romances as "poor imitation[s]" of their white generic forerunners (10). This is not to say that romantic comedy is an inherently white genre, or that the Black romances merely mimic the earlier white films. For decades, however, romantic comedy was almost exclusively white terrain, both behind and in front of the camera (unlike other genres, Black actors rarely even played their traditional role of domestic or comic relief). Most of the genre's most iconic moments have been acted out by white faces and bodies. Any Black—or, for that matter, any non-white—romance will necessarily contend with the genre's long, firmly entrenched, and still vital and visible white history. Still, even as they acknowledge their place in this larger white history, a number of contemporary Black romantic comedies find ways to deconstruct that history and their positions in it—and they do so by projecting this history through a lens of Black cultural history.

*Brown Sugar*, as we have just seen, draws heavily (whether deliberately or not) from *When Harry Met Sally*. . . In one significant sequence, however, the film acknowledges this influence even as it manages to make a claim for its own specificity. Both *Harry* and *Brown Sugar* open with documentary sequences, but it is the differences between these two sequences that provide a space for *Brown Sugar* to contend with its place in a larger generic history. The interview scene that opens *When Harry Met Sally*. . . is one of several scenes spaced throughout the film depicting middle-aged and elderly couples telling the stories of their relationships. These sequences are all fictional (the couples are played by actors) and the histories they relate are personal, rather than social or cultural. On the other hand, the documentary sequence at the beginning of *Brown Sugar*, as we have seen, features real-life rap and hip-hop performers speaking of the history of a culture and a musical form. As I point out above, this sequence clearly situates the ensuing romance within a larger Black experience. Yet, while it is not clear if this particular similarity to *When Harry Met Sally*. . . is deliberate on the part of the filmmakers, it can be read as an acknowledgment of *Brown Sugar's* position vis-à-vis white film history. At the same time, however, it allows this text to assert its own voice as a Black cultural product, effectively de-stabilizing any neat historical or generic trajectory.

These matters are addressed directly in the poem that makes up this chapter's epigraph, which comes from an early scene in *Love Jones*. The "date on the top of the Empire State," is, of course, a clear reference to two popular white romances, Leo McCarey's *An Affair to Remember* and Nora Ephron's *Sleepless in Seattle* (as well as McCarey's original *Love Affair* and Warren Beatty's remake of the same name). In short,

this line brings with it a whole history of white Hollywood romance. The placement of this reference, however—particularly where it falls in the narrative and the setting in which it is spoken—actually manages to lessen its impact. The line comes near the beginning of the movie, before Darius and Nina have even met, as if to point out the metaphorical elephant in the room right away so that it can be disposed of that much more quickly. More importantly, the reference is made by a character who is at the time sitting in The Sanctuary (in fact he is the club's emcee, and as such could be considered a literal voice of Black culture), which as we have already seen is constructed as a specifically Black space. Placing the line in this setting, at this moment in the narrative, has the effect of acknowledging its significance, but at the same time disconnecting it from the history it represents, thereby allowing the ensuing love story to be told on its own terms. These terms are laid out at the end of the scene when Darius attempts to woo Nina by performing a poem (actually written by Reginald Gibson, who appears in the film performing his own work) that consciously reconfigures the conventions of romance in terms specific to Black culture (the refrain of the poem states that he's "the blues in [her] left thigh/tryin' to become the funk in [her] right").

Yet, if contemporary Black romances provide newer, arguably more progressive and "Afrocentric" constructions of Black sexuality and identity, how do they speak more specifically to ideas of Black *female* identity and sexuality? How do they speak to the Black women who watch these films? The institutional constraints on Black women's subjectivity and sexuality have a long, deeply entrenched history and still operate today. Lola Young examines these constraints in the context of Black women's experience as Black women in U. S. history. She traces 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century discourses on science,

religion, and eugenics to show how Black women have been constructed as the dark, sexually excessive "other" throughout American culture. Ultimately, she notes, "Black women [have been] located at the intersection of racial, class and sexual difference," serving as "the embodiment of difference" for the white male power structure (49). Yet, while Young traces the historical marginalization of Black women, these oppressive structures still operate in contemporary America, where Black women must still learn to function in a white patriarchal culture. Writing in *The Journal of Adolescence*, Kumea Shorter-Gooden and Chantell Washington point out that "the context in which African-American women in the United States develop an identity is a racist and sexist one." They add that "the dual oppression that Black women face because of racism and sexism . . . as well as . . . the triple oppression (based on race, gender, and class) that this group contends with because they are disproportionately members of [lower socio-economic groups]" ("Young, Black, and Female").

Because they continue to be marginalized in society and under- (or mis-) represented on the screen, the relationship Black women have to their screen image is even more significant. Constructions of Black sexuality are especially important for Black women, both as figures on the screen and as viewers. "Where images of Black female sexuality are concerned," writes Norma Manatu, "it is precisely because film purports to mirror Black women's socio-sexual experiences that the images offered take on social significance" (25). The history of the representations offered Black women, according to a number of critics, is one of exclusion. bell hooks writes that "Black female spectators have had to develop looking relations within a cinematic context that constructs our presence as absence, [one that] that denies the 'body' of the Black female

so as to perpetuate white supremacy and with it a phallogentric spectatorship” (“Oppositional Gaze,” 118). While this absence and exclusion may be painful, some critics contend that Black women, by virtue of their socio-cultural history, are uniquely qualified to be critical spectators. As Jacqueline Bobo argues,

The struggle to resist the pull of the film and to extract progressive meanings is the same struggle needed to resist domination and oppression in everyday life. This battle is not a new one for Black women. Their cultural competency . . . stems from growing up Black and female in a society which places little value in their situation. (285)

The relationship of Black women to the film image (or, for that matter, to most forms of cultural production), then, is highly complex. But what constructions of sexuality and identity have been produced for them? How have these constructions functioned? As Mary Ann Doane writes, the connection between visibility and sexuality is particularly important when talking about the intersection between race and gender. She points to “the representational power of racism and its intersection with the psychical,” adding that because this intersection operates on “questions of vision, visibility, and representability, there is a sense in which it is strongly applicable to Black women, who are the objects of a double surveillance linked to race and gender” (*Femmes Fatales* 223). For many Black feminist critics, the answers to these questions of “vision, visibility and representability” have been problematic—especially as they have been played out in traditional mainstream white cinema. bell hooks observes that “representations of Black female bodies in contemporary popular culture rarely subvert or critique images of Black female sexuality which were part of the cultural apparatus of 19<sup>th</sup> Century racism and which still shape perceptions today” (“Selling Hot Pussy” 62). The most prevalent of these representations, for a number of critics, are the over-sexed Black woman and the a-sexual Black “Mammy”. “Black women are coded as [a]

particular kind of 'other,' writes Norma Manatu, "sinful, immoral, low-class, unlady-like type women" (64). Even in a time where Black women have made strides both on- and off-screen, Manatu argues that problematic representations remain. "Though Black women now appear in film in greater numbers with greater frequency," she writes, "such appearances are excessively limited to portrayals of the amoral Jezebel, superwoman (quoting Patricia Hill Collins), prostitute, and bitch" (16). On the other end of the spectrum, Iverem cites the sexless, maternal Black maid and Mammy figure that continues into the present moment, most clearly in the person of Whoopi Goldberg, who, despite being one of Hollywood's highest-paid African-American female stars, has made a career of mostly asexual Mammy or masculinized "one of the guys" roles.

Most importantly, as some critics have argued, Black female sexuality is often constructed in opposition to white female sexuality. Doane writes that "when a white patriarchal culture requires a symbol of racial purity to organize and control its relations with Blacks . . . the white woman represents whiteness itself, as racial identity and as *the* stake of a semiotics of power" (244). Lola Young adds that "In terms of representation, Black and white women may be linked by their common sexual unknowability, but white femininity is foregrounded and privileged in relation to Black women (53). For Manatu, this difference is expressed in cinema as a dichotomy between acceptable and unacceptable feminine sexuality.

That the filmic-cultural perspective for "appropriate" sexual behavior is directed toward white women is implicit in white women's overwhelming presence as romantic figures on the screen, even as they also appear as sex objects. Nor can it be overlooked that the film medium also functions as a mechanism to maintain a hierarchical division among women. Black women's absence on the screen as romantic heroines, juxtaposed with their habitual presence as sex objects, more than suggests such a division. (63)

The stakes for representations of African-American female identity and sexuality, then, are high—in many ways, they are higher than those for white women. But do contemporary Black romances represent a significant change in these portrayals? If so, what new ideas do they offer?

As I have discussed, some of the more problematic representations of Black femininity still circulate, even in the more recent Black romantic comedies. The Adina character in *Sprung*, as we saw earlier, is constructed, narratively and visually, as a stereotypical “ho” out to find a rich man. Paula Jai Parker plays Adina as loud, over-the-top and sexually voracious. Her costumes consist mainly of tight, revealing clothes similar to those worn in rap videos. Her make-up is often over-done, and she clearly wears a wig in at least some of her scenes. She is, essentially, a millennial version of the sexually excessive, savage Black female “other” first theorized in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Narratively, Adina is not only over-sexed, but she possesses the power to humiliate the Black male nearly to the point of symbolic castration. When Adina finds out that Clyde is nowhere near as well-off as he’s presented himself to be, she sets off a chain of events that eventually results in a humiliated Clyde standing in a police line-up in his underwear, being asked to masturbate. (A similar dynamic operates in *Woo* (1998), although to a lesser degree. As the title character, Jada Pinket’s actions and attitudes cause no end of trouble for her uptight date Tommy Davidson and his friends.)

The idea of the over-sexed, animalistic Black woman is taken to extremes in not one, but two characters in *Boomerang*. Eartha Kitt plays Lady Eloise, the aging (Kitt was 65 when the film was produced), yet still quite randy cosmetics company head who, near the beginning of the film, forces Marcus (Eddie Murphy) to sleep with her in order to

cement a business deal. A number of (supposedly) comic moments are mined from Kitt's groping of Murphy, leering at him, and making innuendoes in her famous purr. Yet, while Lady Eloise is meant to be a comic character, another female character is decidedly more menacing. Strange (pronounced *strahn-JHAY*), played by Grace Jones, is portrayed as a frightening, unstoppable sexual force of nature. The film makes use of Jones' stature and forceful persona to create the sense of a savage, man-eating creature, but one particular moment makes this idea almost literal. Marcus's advertising company has been hired to produce the campaign for Strange's new fragrance line, and the first ad shown acts out the worst assumptions about Black female sexuality. It is a nightmarish scene in which Strange/Jones, dressed in an outlandish costume, surrounded by disturbing props, writhes and screams in pain and ecstasy until she "gives birth" to her creation, a bottle of perfume. This scene is brief, but it is enough to encapsulate the film's more disturbing discourses on Black women's sexuality and fertility.

While Lady Eloise, Strange, and Marcus's sexually and professionally aggressive colleague Jackie (Robin Givens) either proposition Marcus or actually sleep with him, the film offers the harmless, passive, but at least superficially Afrocentric Angela (Halle Berry) as the "right" romantic choice for him. Angela, however, is presented in a way that seriously downplays her sexuality. This is not to say that Angela is not portrayed engaging in sexual activity, or that she is considered sexually unattractive. Rather, her sexuality is tempered and controlled in the service of the film's larger discussion of Black female sexuality. Berry plays Angela with a low-key, almost meek tone and is usually costumed in modest outfits that camouflage her (now famous) figure. (This portrayal is an ironic contrast to Berry's role in *Strictly Business*, where her image is sexualized in the



traditional manner famously outlined by Laura Mulvey.) According to the dualistic conception of Black female sexuality discussed earlier, Angela must be de-sexualized so that she can fill her role as the nurturing Black mother figure (a role already signified in the character's work with young inner-city children).

In addition to these overtly racist and sexist portrayals, a number of the new Black romances construct Black femininity in a way that betrays the often patriarchal dynamics of African-American gender relations and an anxiety over Black female sexuality. The narratives of *The Brothers* and *The Best Man* are driven, at least in part, by the need to investigate and control the sexuality of the female characters. In *The Brothers*, as we saw earlier, the central conflict between Jack and Denise is the fact that Denise once (briefly) dated Jack's father. Though Denise denies she ever had sex with Jack's father, the fact that she was involved with another man (and one Jack knows firsthand is a sexually active "ladies' man") makes it impossible to see her as anything but damaged goods. Dialogue in the confrontation between Jack and Denise speaks directly to this virgin/whore dichotomy when Jack notes that the word "ho" seems to be "floating around a lot up in here."

A similar conflict occurs in *The Best Man*. When Lance (Chestnut) finds out that his "pure" bride-to-be Mia (Monica Calhoun) once slept with Lance's best friend (and the titular best man) Harper (Diggs), he flies into a rage, beating up Harper and threatening to call off the wedding. The irony here is twofold. Mia is not "pure," as she and Lance have been sleeping—and living—together for years, and Lance has never been able to remain sexually faithful to Mia. Still, it is the sexual behavior of the woman that is the source of the problem—a problem that this film, unlike some of the films I have

discussed above, is never completely able to resolve. Lance and Mia do finally get married, but the wedding scene is marked by Lance's tears and inter-cut shots (presumably images from Lance's imagination) of a nude Mia having sex with Harper.

Despite these overtly racist and patriarchal constructions of the Black femininity, however, the new African-American romances do provide a space for more positive examinations of Black women's subjectivity and sexuality. While these films may be imperfect in their portrayals, they at least allow their female characters to express their own desires—professional, sexual, and otherwise. *Brown Sugar*, for example, pays nearly equal narrative attention to both its male and female lead characters. However, unlike many other romantic comedies—including its generic forerunner *When Harry Met Sally* . . .—its narrative and technical strategies tip the scales just enough to place the emotional weight of the text on the female character. *Harry* employs voice-overs and flashbacks near the conclusion, when Harry reflects on his relationship with—and newly-realized love for—Sally. As I state in my chapter on the Meg Ryan films, this has the effect of making the story essentially Harry's, despite the film's careful division of narrative space between the two characters. In *Brown Sugar*, however, the flash-back and voice-overs are Sidney/Lathan's, giving precedence to *her* feelings about her work and her relationship with Dre and giving the woman the primary voice in the story.

More importantly, within the narrative, Sidney is presented as having a sense of professional agency and purpose that is not threatened by her relationship with Dre or the larger white/male power structure. As a music critic and then magazine editor, she holds power over many of the male artists and music executives in the film, including Dre. As we saw earlier, she even helps finance Dre's new label. These are significant points,

particularly as rap and hip-hop have traditionally been seen as predominantly male domains. Additionally, unlike *You've Got Mail*, where the female lead must literally lose her business to insure the happy romantic ending, Sidney's professional standing is never jeopardized by her romantic and sexual relationships, or vice-versa. In fact, near the end of the film, when Sidney learns that Dre has sent Cavi's new CD to Sidney's magazine in the hopes that Sidney will review it, she angrily reminds him of the conflict of interest involved. Sidney's professional integrity and ambition, however, do not preclude her having her own happy romantic ending. In the last scene, Sidney and Dre reunite on the radio show where Sidney has been promoting her new book (and where Cavi's single premieres). The film thus closes having offered its spectators a personally and professionally fulfilled heroine—and more importantly, one who is fully invested in Black culture—with whom they can identify.

Though they still dabble in some of the more problematic representations of feminine sexuality, some of the millennial Black romances do provide their female spectators an even more important figure with which to identify—the sexually active, sexually confident Black woman who is neither ridiculed, punished, or feared for expressing her sexuality. One of the best examples of such a character is *Love Jones*'s Nina. As played by Nia Long, Nina is smart, confident, beautiful, and sexually attractive without being portrayed as aggressive or a “ho.” Nina sleeps with Darius on their first date, but while this event provides various narrative complications, the act itself is never presented as something to censure or question. The scene is shot in soft lighting and warm tones, conveying sensuality and pleasure. There is nothing in this scene to indicate parody or excessive sexuality, as there were in *Sprung*'s Clyde/Adina sex scenes.

Moreover, Nina is portrayed as feeling no guilt over what could be considered promiscuous behavior—in fact she revels in it. “It was like . . . his dick talked to me,” she giddily tells a girlfriend the next day. Aside from the usual generic complications, Nina suffers no embarrassment or ill effects from taking charge of her own sexuality, nor is the audience asked to judge or make fun of her. Instead, Nina, like Sidney, ends up successful in both her career and her personal relationships.

Though “realistic” is perhaps to loaded a term to use here, characters like Sidney and Nina, though no doubt idealized, are constructions of Black female identity and sexuality to which many contemporary Black women spectators can probably relate or aspire. These are representations of intelligent, ambitious Black women free to express their own identities and their own desires. While such representations are not completely unproblematic and are certainly too few in number, the importance of the fact that they are available to Black female spectators—their sheer visibility—must not be underestimated.

CHAPTER 4  
HURRAH FOR SINGLETONS!  
THE "BRIDGET JONES-ING" OF CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE

Wednesday 15 March

Humph. Have woken up v. fed up. On top of everything, only two weeks to go until birthday, when will have to face up to the fact that another entire year has gone by, during which everyone else except me has mutated into Smug Married, having children plop, plop, left right and center and making hundreds of thousands of pounds and inroads into very hub of establishment, while I career rudderless and boyfriendless through dysfunctional relationships and professional stagnation. (67)

The above quote from Helen Fielding's 1996 comic novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* highlights many of the issues addressed in the growing body of women's popular fiction commonly known as "chick lit." The story of a London "Singleton" attempting to make her way through a landscape fraught with feckless men, dead-end jobs, and the all-too-available temptations of shopping, cigarettes and chardonnay, *Bridget Jones* exemplifies the changes in the ways popular culture for women portrays sexual relationships decades after the height of the women's movement and the sexual revolution. Recent films, novels and television shows aimed primarily at (younger) women do share some of the same features as romantic comedies of the 1980s and 90s, but they also mark important narrative and ideological changes in the romance genre. Because of these shifts, I see these texts (which I will refer to as "chick flicks/movies" and "chick lit/novels") as distinct from, though by no means unconnected to, 80s and 90s romantic comedies such as *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993). Moreover, these texts exhibit many of the conservative tendencies of older forms aimed specifically at female consumers, such as the romance novel and the "woman's film," particularly as their main narrative concerns involve

placing the female protagonist in a monogamous heterosexual relationship. Despite their ostensibly conservative bent, however, chick novels like *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996), as well as films such as *The Sweetest Thing* (2002) and television shows like *Sex and the City* (all of which I will refer to collectively as "chick culture") point to an important shift in women's popular texts, particularly in the ways they represent female desire and subjectivity. Through various narrative and ideological shifts, chick novels, television shows, and movies give contemporary women voice and allow them to express their desires outside the frame of patriarchally-defined heterosexual monogamy.

The emergence of chick lit and chick flicks can be attributed—at least in part—to a perceived demographic shift among female popular culture consumers. For example, as the audience for traditional romance novels has begun to age (the average reader is estimated to be about 45 years old), publishers have begun reaching out to the next generation of female readers ("Dose of 'Chick Lit'"). A blueprint for the new genre came with the success of Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, which Anna Weinberg calls the "Eve of the [chick lit] genre," in 1996 in the UK and 1998 in the US. ("She's Come Undone"). *Bridget*, along with other early works like Laura Zigman's *Animal Husbandry* (1998), focuses, not on the romantic travails of an impossibly beautiful, undeniably wholesome heroine and her strong, hyper-masculine hero, but on the romantic escapades of contemporary young women similar to the novels' intended readers. With their fallible, funny heroines and breezy style, such books "navigated the perilous terrain of the modern woman's psyche with sassy aplomb" ("She's Come Undone"). Around the same time, television programs such as *Ally McBeal*, which premiered on FOX in September

1997, and *Sex and the City*, which bowed on HBO in June 1998 (and was based on Candace Bushnell's 1996 book of the same title), examined similar territory (imdb.com).

Nearly all of these works had significant commercial and critical success. *Bridget Jones's Diary* was an extremely successful bestseller in both Britain and in the U.S. The 2001 film adaptation earned just over \$71.5 million at the American box office (a very respectable showing for a romantic comedy) and earned a Golden Globe nomination for Best Comedy or Musical and Golden Globe and Oscar nominations for star Renée Zellweger. *Sex and the City* resonated not only in the popular imagination (a 1998 *Time* magazine cover features all four of the show's leads), but with the critical community. The show earned multiple Emmy and Golden Globe nominations (winning the Emmy in 2001 and Globes in 2001 and 2002), as did star/executive producer Sarah Jessica Parker, who won three Lead Actress Golden Globes (2000, 2001, 2002) and an Emmy (2004) and co-star Kim Cattrall, who won a Supporting Actress Emmy in 2003 (imdb.com). While sales figures and critical awards cannot provide a concrete indication of *how* readers and viewers read a book or a film, they do clearly indicate that some aspect of these works has caught on with their intended audience(s).

The success of these early texts, especially that of *Bridget Jones's Diary*, revealed a market for stories about—and for—young, single women grappling with modern life and relationships. A whole host of *Bridget* imitators and successors emerged in the next years, including Sophie Kinsella's *Shopaholic* novels, a particularly blatant—and arguably less charming and substantial—product of the *Bridget* formula. Chick lit soon became so popular that whole publishing lines were devoted to the genre. In 2001, Harlequin launched Red Dress Ink, an imprint focused mainly (particularly in the

beginning) on the adventures of single, urban twenty- and early thirty-something women. A 2001 press release announcing the launch of Red Dress Ink lays out the tone and intended audience of the new line: "Red Dress Ink is a women's fiction program that depicts young, single, mostly city-dwelling women coping with the pressures that accompany a career, the dating scene and all the other aspects of modern life in America . . . these books are *Ally McBeal* meets *Sex and the City*" ("Harlequin Launches Red Dress Ink") A blurb on the Harlequin website is even more blatant about the generational—and matrimonial—position of the line's heroines and intended readers, proclaiming that "these books say I'm single, I'm female and I'm having a really good time (despite what my mother may have told you)" ("About Red Dress Ink"). Despite recent complaints of a glut in the field, these new popular novels have had a significant impact on the industry. The emergence of chick lit, according to Anita Jain in *Crain's New York Business*, "is breathing life into a sagging book industry dominated by older readers" (3).

Chick culture texts mark a narrative shift—and, I believe, the beginnings of an ideological move—from the contemporary romantic comedies I have examined throughout this study. Many chick culture texts are superficially similar to romantic comedies such as those starring Meg Ryan, especially in their use of the single, urban working girl/woman as their female lead. More importantly, the primary narrative and ideological concern of both forms appears to be the placement of that female lead into a monogamous heterosexual romance. Indeed, the terms "chick flick" or "chick movie" have become umbrella terms that often include both the chick culture text and the romantic comedy. (The terms are often either used as a put-down, particularly when used by males to dismiss particular texts, or, in the interests of attracting a female audience, a



marketing hook). While the lines between the two are often blurred—*My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), while I have characterized it elsewhere as a romance, ultimately fits more closely with my characterization of a chick flick—some important differences can be seen. Thus, for my purposes here, the terms “chick flick/movie” and “chick lit/novel” refer specifically to popular texts that began to emerge in the late 1990s that place most of their narrative focus on a single, sexually independent (young) woman who may or may not end the story in a traditional heterosexual relationship.

The chick movie and chick novel focus more directly on the female protagonist, her desires, and the community she has created for herself outside the heterosexual relationship, rather than on the relationship itself, as is the case in most romantic comedies of the 1980s and 90s. As I discuss in my chapter on the Meg Ryan romances, almost equal narrative and emotional weight is given to both Ryan's and Tom Hank's characters in a film like *You've Got Mail*; moreover, the focus of the narrative is almost exclusively on their developing romance. The charm of the chick flick *The Sweetest Thing*, on the other hand, rests, not in the romance between Christina (Cameron Diaz) and Peter (Thomas Jane), but in the relationship between Christina and her two best girlfriends (Christina Applegate and Selma Blair). The romance is thinly developed and receives minimal screen time, while the latter relationships are portrayed as fun and full of banter and benefit from the easy chemistry of the three actors playing the friends. While these factors could be attributed to a poorly written screenplay or the accident of actor chemistry, the end result is a text that is—at least on one level—much more concerned with female desire and subjectivity and the pleasures of feminine communities

than it is with the development of the central romance (I discuss these communities in more detail below).

More importantly, while one of the narrative concerns of the chick movie or chick novel is ostensibly the heroine's pursuit of heterosexual romance, these texts allow for endings that, while not necessarily downbeat, do not clearly and finally place the heroine in a romantic relationship. In *My Best Friend's Wedding*, as I have discussed, Julia Roberts' character ends the story, not in the arms of her love interest, but in a dance with her gay best friend, thus reworking the traditional happy romantic comedy ending. Likewise, the recent chick flick *Little Black Book* (2004) follows television producer Stacy (Brittany Murphy) as she attempts to learn more about her boyfriend's romantic past. While the standard romantic comedy formula dictates that after the requisite wacky hijinks and misunderstandings Stacy and her boyfriend would be clearly and happily reunited at the film's end, this text eschews such a conclusion. Instead, Stacy admits that her boyfriend should be with one of his ex-girlfriends and, while initially sad over her breakup, goes on to realize her two lifelong dreams: meeting Carly Simon and working with Diane Sawyer. Further, such non-romantic endings are not limited to chick movies. Laurie Graff's chick novel *You Have to Kiss a Lot of Frogs* (2004) chronicles two decades in a forty-something woman's dating life (the age of the heroine is admittedly a bit of a chick lit anomaly), only to end with her wistfully—but optimistically—single. Such conclusions would be almost completely unacceptable in a romantic comedy, but the construction of chick culture texts—their narrative focus on the female protagonist, their representations of communities that offer love and support outside heterosexual romance—allow these endings to be not only acceptable, but in some cases (in my

opinion, *Wedding* and *Black Book* are two) desirable alternatives to the happy (heterosexual) romantic ending. This is not to suggest that all chick culture texts end in such a fashion (many still end with girl getting boy, with varying degrees of ambiguity) or that such non-traditional conclusions automatically make these texts somehow more progressive than romantic comedies (they are, in many ways, just as regressive). They do, however, mark an important shift from the traditional romantic comedy, which even in the new millennium still attempts to reinforce the patriarchally-sanctioned heterosexual relationship as the center of women's desire and individual development.

Who, then, are the new generation of women to whom these new texts are meant to appeal? Judging from the ways they represent contemporary women, both in their narratives and in their extratextual marketing materials, perhaps Paula Kamen's description of contemporary young women is the most fitting conception, not only of the chick culture protagonist, but of the intended chick culture consumer.

[They are] women born during and shaped by the sexual revolution, the women's movement, new education and work opportunities for women, new religious freedoms, and the information age. Sharing more of men's power, sense of entitlement, and social clout, [they] generally feel more comfortable than did earlier generations in aggressively and unapologetically pursuing their own interests in relationships . . . (3)

For Kamen, the sexual freedoms enjoyed by contemporary young women mark a significant shift from those enjoyed by women of previous generations. "It was as though the 1970s sexual revolution never died but ever so slowly evolved from a male-defined movement into one in which women now call the shots," she writes. "For more women than ever before, this sexual evolution offers a different and enhanced type of sexual freedom than they had access to in the supposedly more free-wheeling 1960s and 1970s" (7).

Kamen's conception of the sexually confident, independent contemporary young women is cautiously optimistic; however, for other critics the celebration—and representation—of female sexual independence and power is actually part of a patriarchally-sanctioned conception of feminism: “do-me” feminism. In a polemical examination of popular images of feminism, Ruth Shallit describes the “do-me feminist” (first characterized by *Esquire* magazine) as

Plucky, confident, upwardly mobile, and extremely horny. She is alert to the wounds of race and class and gender, but she knows that feminism is safe for women who love men and bubble baths and kittenish outfits; that the right ideology and the best sex are not mutually exclusive. She knows that she is as smart and ambitious as a guy, but she's proud to be a girl and girlish. (“Canny and Lacy”)

This description fits both Kamen's “superrats” and many chick-culture protagonists; more importantly, it offers a comforting representation of sexual relationships to women who wish to retain the gains of the women's movement while both avoiding what may be seen as the less desirable aspects of feminism (such as stridency or lesbianism) and maintaining traditional sexual relationships with men. Though this “best of both worlds” conception of feminism possesses an undeniable appeal, Shalit argues that it is “really nothing but a male producer's fantasy of feminism, which manages simultaneously to exploit and deplore, to arouse and moralize.” More importantly, Shalit contends that this particular fantasy is constructed as much for men as for women; it provides a way to “pander to a politically correct sensibility while attracting male viewers in droves.”

While Shalit ascribes this problematic construction of popular feminism to the machinations of male-dominated institutions, the same regressive ideas have been identified in certain other forms of feminism for a number of years—particularly in what has come to be known as “postfeminism.” While the term has come to represent a variety of ideas and evoke a number of connotations, for my purposes postfeminism

represents a conception of women's experience that exists in a specific historical and ideological relation to second wave feminism of the 1960s and 70s. As early as 1993, Andrea Press and Terry Stratham write that one definition of postfeminism—used most often by women who were involved in the second wave

describes the mindset of women who came of age after the heyday of the women's movement and benefitted from the painfully gained social reforms and changed attitudes, but who categorically refuse to call themselves feminist and cling to symbols of women's traditionally 'special' status. ("Work, Family . . .")

Four years later, in their introduction to an anthology on third wave feminism, Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake state the case even more plainly. "Let us be clear," they announce. "Postfeminism characterizes a group of young, conservative feminists who explicitly define themselves against and criticize feminists of the second wave" (1).

Much of the tension between second wave and postfeminism arises from many postfeminist critics' contention that second wave feminism's concern with issues of sexual inequality and sexual violence have created an environment that limits women's lives and heterosexual relationships. Katie Roiphe argues that feminism has given women "a new stock plot, a new identity spinning, not around love, not marriage . . . but passivity and victimhood" (quid Siegel, 64). This "victim feminism," Naomi Wolf argues, is not only "obsolete because . . . the conditions of women's lives have been transformed," but it separates modern women from an essential, necessary aspect of their feminine identity (quid Siegel 64). Elsewhere, Wolf writes that since the women's movement and the sexual revolution, "we have lost the sense of the value of female sexuality, and . . . we are suffering from that as if from a vitamin deficiency" ("Brideland" 40). She suggests that the solution to this deficiency is to "find rituals [and] experiences" that celebrate the value of (what is ultimately a conservative construction

of) female sexuality ("Brideland" 39). "While few people want the bad old days of enforced virginity to return," she continues, "there is a terrible spiritual and emotional longing among [women] for social behavior or ritual that respects, even worships female sexuality and reproductive potential" ("Brideland" 39). Wolf speaks of "new" rituals and behavior and tries to separate herself from the "bad old days" of repressed female sexuality, but her rhetoric of respecting and valuing women's sexuality takes on a particularly conservative tinge, especially in light of her self-described "mystique-laden" reaction to the traditional wedding ceremony described elsewhere in this essay (entitled, appropriately enough, "Brideland").

Postfeminism's twin ideological impulses to enjoy the gains of the women's movement while still promoting women's traditional place in heterosexual relationships operates in many chick culture texts. . The protagonists of HBO's *Sex and the City* (who are actually slightly older than the protagonists and intended audience of most chick lit and chick flicks/shows), for example, possess economic and—in their minds, at least—sexual power that places them on an equal footing with most men. The first conversation between the four friends in the series pilot, in fact, centers on whether women, now that they have achieved social and economic equality with men, have the power to conduct their sex lives like men—with no commitments and no guilt. Following this scene, one of the friends, Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker) sets out to "have sex like a man" and, without hesitation or embarrassment, initiates a "one-night stand" with an old flame. As soon as they finish having sex Carrie departs with a half-hearted promise to call, proud that she has been able to have the same guilt-free, commitment-free sex she and her friends believe has always been a male prerogative ("*Sex and the City*.")

Perhaps the chick culture text that most directly mobilizes the fantasy of the woman calling the sexual shots is *The Sweetest Thing*. The film opens with testimonials from men who have been overwhelmed (and in some cases decimated) by the sexual power of the heroine, Christina Walters (Cameron Diaz). As played by Diaz, Christina is a sexually confident and assertive (yet somehow never threatening) party girl who also has a successful career as a PR executive and close, nurturing relationships with her two best girlfriends (Christina Applegate and Selma Blair). For much of the film, Christina is presented as a young woman who enjoys all the perks and freedoms of the previous decades' revolutions. She is described as "the kind of woman who can get any guy she wants" and a "player" who ends relationships when they are no longer fun for her. Christina and her friends are so sexually confident that the unrated version of the film even includes a comic musical sequence in which they celebrate the many ego-stroking lines they feed men about penis size and male sexual prowess.

Yet, while Christina, Carrie, and other chick culture protagonists appear to enjoy unprecedented sexual freedom, the fantasies of female sexual power offered by these texts ultimately cannot hold. Carrie does have sex like a man, but later in the episode she is disheartened—and perhaps left even more insecure—to find out that her partner *likes* that she wants a no-strings-attached, sex-whenever-it's-convenient-for-both-of-us arrangement ("Sex and the City"). Similarly, the sexual power Christina supposedly wields does not hold up to close scrutiny. To begin with, except for some mild flirtation and enduring the advances of numerous men at a dance club, Christina is never portrayed engaging in any real sexual activity, promiscuous or otherwise. The presentation of Christina as a heartbreaking "player" comes from the male characters who have

presumably been rejected by her, not from anything in her behavior. More importantly, Christina's reluctance to settle down is ascribed to pathology rather than sexual independence. She runs through guys, we are told, because she's afraid to let anyone get too close. (This all changes, of course, when she meets and gets "bah-jiggity" over Peter, the film's designated "Mr. Right.") Chick culture's ideological progression from contemporary romantic comedy, then, is at best limited and qualified.

While the shifts from the romantic comedy to the chick flick or chick novel are important, equally interesting are the similarities and ultimate differences between these texts and other, older popular forms constructed specifically for women in their marketing and address. Although they do represent a new direction in female-oriented popular texts, the works that began to emerge in the late 1990s do share a number of similarities with earlier films and novels produced for women. Like the woman's film and the romance novel, contemporary chick movies and chick lit are women's genres, not only in their focus on female voice and narrative point of view, but in their direct marketing and specific appeal to female consumers. Mary Ann Doane points out that the emergence of the woman's film was a product of "Hollywood's analysis of its own market, its own grouping of films along the lines of sexual address" (3-4). She explains that "due to the war and the enlistment of large numbers of young men in the armed forces, film producers assumed that cinema audiences would be predominantly female," and thus "the anticipation of a female audience resulted in a situation wherein female stars and films addressed to women became more central to the industry" (4). Thus, films such as *Now, Voyager* (1942) were produced as much to meet a specific demographic need as they were to address any renewed interest in women's stories.



According to Janice Radway, the growth of the paperback romance industry also “had much to do with the special characteristics of its audience, that is, with the unique situation of women in America” (32). Radway notes that early gothic romances were sold largely at grocery stores and drugstores, two spaces American women would necessarily frequent regularly in their roles as housewives and mothers. The novels were thereby marketed to an essentially constrained, if not captive, audience, ensuring that “the publishers could be sure of regularly reaching a large segment of the adult female audience” and at the same time “limit advertising expenditures because the potential or theoretical audience they hoped to attract already had been gathered for them” (32). Radway adds, however, that these tactics began to change in the 1960s and 1970s (perhaps in response to the shifting social and material circumstances of American women in this period). She points to the 1972 publication of Kathleen Woodiwiss’s *The Flame and the Flower*, which was “given all the publicity, advertising, and promotion usually reserved for proven bestsellers” as the first moment in which a romance novel was marketed and distributed, not as a “woman’s” novel, but as a mainstream work of fiction (34).

While the marketing of contemporary chick lit may not appear to be as overtly tied to the specific position of its intended readers in their daily lives as the marketing of the romance novel was, the growth of the genre is also tied to market and demographic concerns. To reach their intended readers, chick novels and films, like the romance novels and women’s films before them, must be marketed in a way that makes them easy to spot by their intended consumers. The changes in women’s social and economic positions, as well as shifts in book retailing practices, may make it more difficult to take

advantage of the literal physical circumstances of a specific audience, as in the case of the early romance novels, but these novels are still placed and presented in a way that makes it easy for the potential reader to recognize them as chick lit. A brief overview in *Marketing for Women* notes that “most bookstores have created chick-lit display areas, such as prominent tables by the door, [although] none have created separate aisles for them the way they would shelve romance or mystery titles” (9).

Perhaps the most important aspect of marketing chick lit is the books’ covers, which are often brightly-colored and feature such unmistakable signifiers of contemporary femininity as lipstick, purses, cocktail glasses and stiletto-heeled shoes. The first book in the *Shopaholic* trilogy, for example, was released with a hot pink spine and a drawing of a high-heeled shoe on the bottom corner of the cover. Similarly, Anna Maxted’s novels *Behaving Like Adults* (2003) and *Running in Heels* (2001) are even more brightly colored and feature cartoon drawings of hyperfeminine women wearing high heels or exaggerated make-up. Such packaging not only makes the books easy for the potential reader to identify, but it signals the hip young protagonist with whom the reader is meant to identify.

Similarly to chick novels, chick movies are also often marketed in a way that marks them specifically *as* chick movies. In the case of the films, it is the trailer that most clearly conveys the subject matter to an intended audience. Many chick movie trailers have a number of components in common, the first of which is at least one shot of the heroine being clumsy or suffering some kind of embarrassment. A trailer for *The Sweetest Thing*, for example, shows star Cameron Diaz taking several pratfalls, including one where a garishly-dressed Diaz falls and interrupts a wedding ceremony. Likewise,

probably the most memorable moment in the trailer for *Bridget Jones's Diary* is the clip of Bridget answering her phone with a sexually suggestive remark, only to find her mother at the other end of the line. In addition to these moments of humiliation, the trailers also include at least one image of the heroine in a lighthearted or exuberant moment, such as the shot of Ashley Judd performing a cheerleading high-jump in the *Someone Like You* (2001) preview, or the image of Jennifer Lopez dancing with her friends in the *Maid in Manhattan* (2002) trailer. And nearly all the trailers use pop songs (either easily recognizable classics or up-to-the-minute songs by young female artists) to convey the emotional tone of the film, from the Isley Brothers' "This Old Heart of Mine" in the *Sweetest Thing* trailer to Vanessa Carlton's "1000 Miles" in the preview for *Maid in Manhattan*. (Further proof that these songs are meant solely as marketing tools is the fact that they are often not used in the film itself.) The formula for constructing a chick movie trailer is now so fixed that viewers can immediately identify the film being advertised as a chick flick, even before the film's titles or stars are announced.

Like those of other popular "female" texts as the woman's film and the romance novel, the discursive strategies of many chick movies and novels mark them as "feminine" in both narrative concern and address. Annette Kuhn writes that one of the distinguishing characteristics of a "[women's genre] as a textual system is its construction of narratives motivated by female point-of-view" (437). Mary Ann Doane writes that the woman's film, for example, "appears to allow [the female protagonist] significant access to point of view structures and the enunciative level of the filmic discourse," (3). This access is created by the use of such devices as the voice-over, the flashback, and the fantasy sequence, all of which, in the case of the woman's film, are marked as belonging

to the female protagonist. Both *Rebecca* (1939) and *Letter From an Unknown Woman* (1948), for instance, use the devices of the voice-over and the flashback to signal that these are *women's* stories, no matter how narrative and visual strategies may ultimately undercut the authority of the female voice. The story in *Letter*, in fact, is literally told by its female protagonist. The film's narrative is framed by a letter written by Lisa (Joan Fontaine) to a man with whom she has been in love for years. Further, the narrative unfolds as a series of flashbacks constructed as Lisa's memories, narrated by Lisa/Fontaine's voice-overs.

It is in its construction as a female narrative that the woman's film differs from the screwball romantic comedy, another genre which bears striking similarities to chick lit and chick flicks. While the woman's film places the female protagonist at the visual and narrative center of the text, the screwball romantic comedy at best divides its narrative weight between the male and female protagonist (a strategy that is present, though to different effect, in many contemporary romantic comedies). Films such as *It Happened One Night* (1934) or *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) do not employ the same narrative and technical strategies that make the woman's film a *woman's* film, but usually unfold as third-person narratives with generally unrestricted points of view. Moreover, the plots of these comedies often turn on the fact that the man possesses knowledge that the woman doesn't (Dexter knows what really happened between Mike and Tracy long before Tracy does in *The Philadelphia Story*, and in Peter is aware of Ellie's real identity early in *It Happened One Night*, while Ellie does not learn that Peter is a reporter following her story until much later in the narrative), shifting the balance of power and narrative weight to the male. Such imbalances certainly operate in the woman's film. What is significant

for my purposes, however, is that the narrative, enunciative, and marketing strategies of contemporary chick culture have specific connections to those of the woman's film that they do not have to classical Hollywood romantic comedies. (This is certainly not to say that other, equally interesting connections do not exist between the two).

Contemporary popular texts for women employ many of the narrative and discursive strategies of earlier texts to give their female protagonists a literal voice. Like their predecessors, chick lit and chick movies usually focus on a female protagonist and use a variety of textual and technical strategies to place her desires and motivations at the center of the narrative. *Bridget Jones* and many of the chick novels produced by publishing imprints like Red Dress Ink are often written in first person in the heroine's voice, conveying the notion that these novels, although fiction, are authentic, in-depth accounts of women's experiences. This move toward first-person narration is an especially significant change from the third-person narration employed in most traditional romance novels. As Tania Modleski notes, one of the effects of this third-person perspective was to reinforce the heroine's position as the (often literal) object of a (primarily male) gaze (*Loving* 56). The move toward first-person voice in most contemporary chick novels not only strengthens the heroine's voice and increases the reader's opportunities to identify with her, but it offers at least a temporary escape from patriarchal surveillance. The notion of authenticity, however, is a complex one, and I do not mean to imply that the presence of a female author or protagonist, or even the use of first-person narrative voice, guarantees that a particular text is an authentic representation of female experience. What is significant here is the vigorous attempt in these texts—a

nd in their marketing—to present themselves as representations of true female experience.

The novel version of *Bridget Jones* puts this first-person voice into diary form, emphasizing both the intimacy of the reflections and the narrative's first-person feminine point of view. The style and structure of the novel further reinforce the notion of an intimate, personal female utterance. While passages of the novel often employ the same narrative voice and temporal strategies as other more traditional works of fiction (a first-person, past tense account of events that have already occurred) many sections are written in an immediate, abbreviated style that marks them as Bridget's direct, unmediated utterances. This style runs throughout the "diary entries," including the one in which Bridget begins a relationship with her boss, Daniel Cleaver.

**5:45 p.m.** Could not be more joyous. Computer messaging re: presence or otherwise of skirt continued obsessively all afternoon. Cannot imagine respected boss did stroke of work. Weird scenario with Perpetua (penultimate boss), since knew I was messaging and v. angry, but fact that was messaging ultimate boss gave self conflicting feelings of loyalty—distinctly unlevel playing field were anyone with an ounce of sense would say ultimate boss holds sway. (23)

An even clearer example of such direct and unmediated utterances can be found in one of several entries Bridget supposedly has written while drunk. In one case, Bridget has just returned home after drowning her sorrows over Daniel with her girlfriends Shazzer and Jude. She writes, "**2 a. m.** Argor sworeal brilleve with Shazzan Jude. Dun stupid care about Daniel stupid prat. Feel sickly though. Oops" (59). Rather than describing the evening after the fact, Fielding uses an almost phonetic spelling and stream-of-consciousness style that convey Bridget's emotional and physical state at the moment they occur, giving the reader an even more vivid image of their heroine and marking these passages as clearly emanating from that heroine. This tone and style continue

throughout the novel, conveying the sense that Bridget is recording the events immediately as she remembers them—or, in many cases, as she experiences them.

Yet, while *Bridget Jones* bears some similarity to other popular feminine forms, the style and use of language in the novel arguably set it apart as particularly feminine. As such, it engages in discursive strategies that some critics see as resisting patriarchal pressures placed on more traditional feminine texts such as women's films and romance novels. With its exclamations, abbreviations, and disregard for standard sentence structure, *Bridget Jones's Diary* could arguably be seen as an example of a semiotic (preverbal, outside of symbolic systems) utterance as theorized by Julia Kristeva.

Kristeva writes that

The *semiotic* [is] a psychosomatic modality of the signifying process, in other words, not a symbolic modality but one articulating (in the largest sense of the word) a continuum: the connections between the (glottal and anal) sphincters in (rhythmic and intonational) vocal modulations, or those between the sphincters and family protagonists, for example. (38)

While this is not to argue that *Bridget Jones's Diary* is a manifestation of female hysteria (although that case might possibly be made), or to say that the novel resides outside symbolic order (as Kristeva points out, even the semiotic cannot actually function outside the symbolic), many of the novel's passages—particularly the drunken utterances—convey the sense of a struggle against symbolic order and structure. More importantly, because the semiotic is theorized as existing in tension with the phallogocentric symbolic order, the semiotic is arguably a particularly feminine modality. Thus, it is highly significant that a text written by (both within the narrative and in "reality") and ostensibly for women should engage in what can be seen—at least to a certain extent—as a particularly feminine mode of signification.

The film adaptation of *Bridget Jones's Diary* also uses a variety of strategies to announce itself as the heroine's story, including those used in the traditional Hollywood woman's film. The movie uses voice-overs, fantasy sequences and graphic representations of text from Bridget's diary to add psychological depth to the character and to allow the spectator to identify more fully with her. In fact, the film opens by announcing itself as literally Bridget's story. Over shots of Bridget/Zellweger walking through the snow to a family function, her voice-over begins the story. "It all began on New Years day, my thirty-second year of being single." The music that accompanies the opening lines, as well as Zellweger's delivery of them, evoke not only the "Once Upon a Time" beginnings of many traditional fairy tales, but also the introductory voice-overs such as the one performed by Joan Fontaine in *Rebecca*. Yet, while aspects of this voice-over—and much of the film—bear a certain resemblance to traditional popular texts for women, the enunciative techniques employed in *Bridget Jones's Diary* work on another level to both mark this text as a "true" woman's story—a story "written" by a woman about her experiences for consumption by other women—and at the same time to poke fun at the earlier forms.

The film's opening voice-over, for example, continues throughout the first scene, in which Bridget attends a New Year's Day brunch and suffers the multiple indignities of maternal nagging over her wardrobe, inappropriate groping by an old family friend, and a particularly embarrassing first meeting with Mark Darcy (Colin Firth), the story's intended hero. The scene ends on a freeze-frame of Bridget/Zellweger at the moment Bridget has been unceremoniously rejected by Mark, and Bridget's voice-over (which continues through the opening credits) declares that "that was it. Right there. That was



the moment . . . I decided to take control of my life and start writing a diary to tell the truth about Bridget Jones. The whole truth." On the surface, this moment can be read as a patriarchal address to single women who fail to assume their rightful place as wives and mothers in a male-dominated, still marriage-oriented society: "I was so pathetic in my failure to build a monogamous relationship that I became even more narcissistic and began scribbling meaningless stuff in a diary like a ten-year-old girl." Further, it evokes moments in earlier women's films like *Now, Voyager* in which the protagonist's narrative becomes a means of diagnosing or explaining her pathology.

Yet, beneath these unmistakably regressive impulses is a sense in which the attempt to tell "the whole truth" about Bridget Jones represents—at least as much as it is possible in a commercial text produced in a male-dominated industry—an attempt to tell a woman's story *for* women, not for the patriarchal culture in which it is performed. The fact that Bridget chooses to record her experiences in the privacy of a diary, rather than the more public form of a newspaper column, as in the TV version of *Sex and the City*<sup>1</sup>, or on a television show (the climactic declaration of love in the film *Someone Like You* occurs on a live talk show broadcast) is a clear indication of this attempt. The privacy of the diary, of course, occurs only within the film's diegesis (and even that is undercut by the end of the story, as I discuss below). A commercial film is most certainly a public text produced by and subject to the control of the dominant—in this case male-oriented—culture. The use of the diary trope, however, signals at least an understanding that the diary is a private mode of expression that is (at least ostensibly) removed from the control and gaze of the larger patriarchal culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Both *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Sex and the City* began as newspaper columns before they were turned into novels and eventually adapted for film and television.

The film further undercuts the conventions of the woman's film—and by extension the conservative assumptions that underlie the genre—by using those conventions for humorous, almost parodic effect. In one early moment of the film, a flirtatious exchange with her crush Daniel Cleaver (Hugh Grant) leads Bridget into an immediate, brief (single-shot) fantasy of her wedding to Daniel. Much like the flashback sequences of the woman's film, this sequence is intended to provide insight into Bridget's character, particularly to her desire for, and place in, heterosexual monogamy. However, the way the fantasy is presented adds a comedic layer that sets it apart from similar sequences in the woman's film. It also allows it to question the assumption that—to paraphrase the title of an earlier romantic comedy about a single woman in search of a husband—*Every Girl Wants to be Married*. The humorous intent of the fantasy becomes clear from the beginning, as the shot opens with an exaggerated close-up of Bridget's mother's smiling face, then moves to the "happy couple." The stylized performances of Grant (who has the only intelligible dialogue in the fantasy) and Zellweger further indicate that the moment is to be understood as comic. The clearest signal that this fantasy is not to be taken seriously, however, arguably comes on the soundtrack. In a voice over at the beginning of the sequence, Bridget/Zellweger hums a quick, almost silly version of the Wedding March, giving a parodic edge to one of the most easily identifiable signifiers of patriarchally-defined marriage. In this moment, as in others throughout the film, the tropes and enunciative techniques of the traditional woman's film (and, indeed, of earlier romance films in general) are turned in on themselves, raising questions about female desire and how that desire can be expressed in "feminine" texts.

Like the *Bridget Jones* novel(s) and film, the HBO television series *Sex and the City* shares the concerns of earlier texts with women's experience and voices. And, like the *Bridget* texts, *Sex and the City* borrows the conventions and themes of more traditional female forms, only to turn them into something unmistakably contemporary and arguably feminist. Women's writing and storytelling literally act as a central structuring device of the program. The show's main character, Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker), is a New York columnist who writes about sexual relationships in contemporary Manhattan—Carrie is, as she puts it in the pilot episode, a “sexual anthropologist” (“*Sex and the City*”). More importantly, in nearly every episode, Carrie/Parker's voice-overs narrate her own and the other characters' sexual (mis)adventures (including those of several male characters). The pilot episode, in fact, begins with Carrie/Parker intoning the timeless fairy-tale opening, “Once Upon a Time . . .” These words connect *Sex and the City* to traditional folk tales, as well as to the female-narrated woman's film and the often fairy-tale-like romance novel. The notion that the show subscribes to these earlier texts' conservative fantasies, however, is almost immediately overturned. The story Carrie narrates is not one of a beautiful princess finding love with a handsome prince, but of a modern career woman being dumped by her commitment-phobic boyfriend. This tale has a cynical, rather than a happy ending, one that proclaims the “end of love in Manhattan” (“*Sex and the City*”).

This is not to say that the show resists the ideological pull of the search for Prince Charming, or that it does not occasionally consciously play on women's perceived desire for the fairy-tale. The series finale, in which Big, Carrie's newly-reformed Knight in Shining Armor, rescues Carrie from her unhappy life with a cold, selfish Prince in the

"Tower" of the Paris Ritz, bears this out ("An American Girl In Paris"). As the dynamics of the pilot indicate, however, the show's relationship to these regressive fantasies is at best a conflicted one. Further, unlike the fairy-tale—or the woman's film, another text that is ostensibly a woman's story—the stories in this text are being told by women, both in the diegesis (Carrie's columns) and through the show's narrative devices (the voice-overs).

While the voice-over device clearly foregrounds the feminine voice anchoring the show, a second device marks this voice even more clearly as a particularly contemporary one. Each episode focuses on a particular question—nearly always about sex and relationships—that Carrie is examining in that week's column. The question is nearly always foregrounded in the episode, both visually and on the soundtrack. A typical scene shows Carrie in her apartment, working at her laptop, as the voice-over takes us through her ruminations on that week's topic. Then, at some point near the end of the scene, we see Carrie's computer screen in close-up as she types the question. At the same moment, Carrie/Parker repeats the question in a voice-over. The glib manner in which the questions are often phrased—"Are we sluts?" Carrie asks in one episode—often deflects attention from their real significance ("Are We Sluts?"). While the questions cover a wide range of relationship issues—"Do Women Just Want to be Rescued?" ("Where there's Smoke . . .") "Can You be Friends with an Ex?" ("Ex and the City")—perhaps the cumulative thrust of the questions over six seasons can best be summed up in the question famously ascribed to Sigmund Freud: "What do women want?" In this case, however, the question does not issue from within a patriarchal institution for the purposes of comprehending some eternal female mystery or diagnosing feminine pathology—at

least, not within the show's diegesis. Rather, in pondering friendship with an ex or how many sexual partners is too many, the 'question of the week' device *represents* the desires and attempts of many real-life contemporary women to investigate the mysteries of modern sexual relationships and gender roles in their own terms and to determine their place within these relationships for themselves.

Beyond similar marketing strategies and textual devices, perhaps the most important connection—as well as the most significant point of departure—between emerging “chick culture” and the women's genres that preceded it is that the primary focus of each of these texts is not simply on the woman, but on the woman's place in patriarchal culture. In both the romance novel and contemporary chick novels, this question is framed within the context of the monogamous heterosexual relationship. Those novels Radway (through the responses of her research subjects) categorizes as the “ideal romance” focus exclusively on the growing relationship between a heroine a hero, without any narrative diversions. Any rival for the heroine's affections is either presented as negligible or as a true villain who poses a real threat of sexual violence (133). Radway notes that the “one woman-one man” formula is so important to the readers she surveyed that they will categorically reject the novels that do not follow it (123). In chick culture texts however, the romantic relationship is often given much less narrative and emotional weight than the heroine's own experiences and her relationships—both platonic and sexual—with other characters. A number of contemporary chick novels, in fact, break one of the cardinal rules of the “ideal romance” identified in Radway's study: They do not focus solely on their female protagonist's developing relationship with the “right” man, but often portray the woman engaging in one or more sexual relationships (with varying

degrees of success and pleasure) before she settles down with the right man. Thus, in these novels, sex becomes a way for the woman to explore her own subjectivity and express her own desires, rather than the culmination of a single, patriarchally-sanctioned heterosexual romance narrative.

Bridget Jones, for example, may write constantly about her desire for marriage and the right man, but the novel's emphasis on Bridget's search for selfhood—and, as we will see, her relationships with her friends—outweighs the quest for romantic partnership. More importantly, much of the story's emotional and comic weight is given to Bridget's crush and subsequent relationship, not with Mark Darcy, the story's hero, but with the charming rogue Daniel Cleaver (who, according to Steve Neale's theory of romantic comedy is the "wrong partner" who must be disposed of by the narrative's end). A flirtatious e-mail exchange early in the novel reveals Daniel to be irresistibly witty and sexy (to Bridget, at least), if not completely trustworthy. "You appear to have forgotten your skirt," he writes in his opening salvo. "As I think is made perfectly clear in your contract of employment, staff are expected to be fully dressed at all times" (20). He follows this message up with another, equally suggestive one:

If walking past office was attempt to demonstrate presence of skirt can only say that it has failed miserably. Skirt is indisputably absent. Is skirt off sick? . . . If skirt is indeed sick, please look into how many days sick leave skirt has taken in previous twelvemonth. Spasmodic nature of recent skirt attendance suggests malingering. (21)

Far from being put off or considering herself sexually harassed, Bridget relishes the "undeniably flirtatious" exchange and waits eagerly for his responses. The appeal of the charming bad boy (to Bridget, and we can assume, the reader) is further illustrated in Bridget's reaction to her first sexual encounter with Daniel. She spends the day after in a state of "shag-drunkenness, mooning about the flat, smiling, picking things up and putting

them down again" (52). Though Daniel ultimately ends up betraying Bridget, the character and the relationship are constructed to invite the reader's identification with Bridget's infatuation.

Mark Darcy, on the other hand, only makes a few brief appearances in the first half of the novel. True, his first appearance in the novel—a "meet cute" in which he and Bridget are constantly being shoved at each other by well-meaning mothers and family friends—makes it clear to any reader familiar with romantic comedy conventions that he is the "right" partner for Bridget. Yet, while Daniel's first exchange with Bridget is filled with flirtation and sexual innuendo, Mark barely manages to ask Bridget if she's "read any good books lately" when they are introduced to each other (13). Moreover, Mark is given much less narrative weight than Daniel—or, for that matter, Bridget's other friends and family—as he appears on only three scenes (though they are admittedly important moments) throughout the first three-fourths of the book. Even at the end of the novel, when the romance between the two is finally underway, Mark exists more in Bridget's thoughts than as a present character participating in the action. (He spends much of the last part of the story out of the country, attempting to save Bridget's mother from imprisonment due to her adulterous lover's fraudulent dealings.) Although it is clear from the beginning that Mark, the proper, literally heroic representative of white patriarchy (he is a wealthy barrister) is the man intended for Bridget, other elements of the story—particularly the ill-fated romance between Bridget and Daniel—are recounted in a way that threatens to overwhelm the ultimate approved heterosexual match.

The ideological implications of the charming cad (particularly for female viewers or readers) are certainly important and merit further investigation. The point here,

however, is that contemporary chick lit often presents the heroine in sexual relationships with men other than the narrative's intended hero, without punishing her or questioning her actions. In the romance novel, such relationships would almost necessarily be presented as rape scenarios, since the sexually innocent heroine (always a requirement in the traditional romance) could not be allowed to enjoy a sexual encounter with any man other than her intended mate. There are, Radway argues, ideological reasons for such a constrictive construction of female sexuality. "When [a] text portrays a heroine who is neither harmed nor disturbed by her ability to have sex with several men," writes Radway, "I suspect it is classified as "bad" [by the readers in her study] because it makes explicit the threatening implications of an unleashed feminine sexuality" (74). This is certainly not to say that the more sexually active chick culture protagonists are necessarily more progressive representations of female sexuality. As Maureen Turim cautions, "we should not confuse engaging with sex acts or actively pursuing partners outside marriage with all that constitutes a desiring subject" ("Women's Films"). By giving the female protagonist in a number of sexual partners and experiences (though still almost exclusively heterosexual), however, chick lit and other chick culture products detach the narrative of feminine subjectivity and desire from the narrative of one "right" monogamous heterosexual relationship and present the heroine's sexuality as something positive and self-determined. Perhaps even more importantly, these more experienced heroines are also easier for their intended readers (contemporary young singles) to relate to, as it is not only accepted but expected in contemporary culture that young women will have had at least some sexual experience before settling into a long-term monogamous relationship.



Though they do represent a change from other popular constructions of female desire and sexuality, chick lit and chick movies do share—although in a slightly altered manner—one narrative similarity with traditional romance novels. Radway writes that in the romance novel, “two initially distinct stories are progressively intertwined. . . . the heroine’s search for her identity dovetails rather quickly with the tale of her developing relationship to the hero.” (*Reading* 139). Thus, she concludes “the romance is concerned not simply with the fact of heterosexual marriage,” but with the woman’s development in relation to a patriarchal male (139). While this search for the heroine’s identity is often quite literal in the romance novel—in historical romances the heroine is often separated from her family and sometimes mistaken for a woman of a lower social class and loose sexual mores—the female protagonist’s journey toward maturity and *self*-identity is a feature of many chick lit narratives. Yet, the relation of this story to the development of the central romance operates quite differently in chick novels than in the traditional romance.

Contemporary chick lit appears to share the dual concerns of the romance novel, as it often parallels the heroine’s developing subjectivity with her search for a monogamous heterosexual relationship. Overall, the general narrative thrust of many of these texts is the heroine’s journey to mature selfhood, usually on more than one front. Interestingly, the main focus of the heroine’s growth narrative often concerns her relationship with one or both of her parents. Throughout *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, for example, the plot line that intersects Bridget’s move toward heterosexual monogamy is that of Bridget’s relationship with her parents—particularly her overbearing, self-obsessed mother. In fact, the novel opens by specifically setting up a narrative

connection between Bridget's relationship with her mother and her future relationship with Mark Darcy. In the first chapter, Bridget's mother telephones, ostensibly to see whether Bridget will be attending Geoffrey and Una Alconbury's New Year's Day Turkey Curry Buffet, but actually to play matchmaker between Bridget and Mark (or, to put it more accurately, to find her daughter *any* suitable husband). "Oh, did I mention? Malcolm and Elaine Darcy are coming [to the Buffet] and bringing Mark with them. Do you remember Mark, darling? He's one of those top-notch barristers. Masses of money. Divorced" (9). At the Turkey Curry Buffet, both Bridget's mother makes several subtle attempts to excite Mark's interest in Bridget, seemingly to no avail.

The intersection between the maternal relationship and the romance continues, both directly and indirectly, throughout the novel. At one point Bridget's mother arranges a job in television for her (a career move that also takes Bridget out of Daniel Cleaver's orbit), which eventually leads to Mark giving Bridget a career-saving interview and the ultimate deepening of their relationship. The connection between the two narratives is foregrounded most clearly in the novel's conclusion. In fact, the ending almost literally enacts the scenario of turning from the (overbearing, consuming) maternal object to the male object of desire. In a convoluted plot twist, Mark manages to save Bridget's mother from implication in her adulterous lover's time share fraud, even going so far as to follow the pair out of the country to get back the victims' money. The plot climaxes with Mark, Bridget, Bridget's parents, the grifter lover, and the police at the Jones house on Christmas Day, Bridget's mother obviously not over—or contrite about the affair, her father humiliated, and the lover carried off in handcuffs. At this point, Bridget describes

how Mark rescues her from this torturous family moment, and in doing so brings both narrative threads to their conclusion.

I stared at the hideous scene, felling as though my whole world was collapsing around my ears. Then I felt a strong hand on my arm.

'Come on.' said Mark Darcy. . . .

'Mrs. Jones,' Said Mark firmly. 'I am taking Bridget away to celebrate what is left of the Baby Jesus' birthday.'

I took a big breath and grasped Mark Darcy's proffered hand.

'Merry Christmas, everyone,' I said with a gracious smile. 'I expect we'll see you all at the Turkey Curry Buffet.' (265)

Bridget goes off with Mark, and, as generic conventions dictate, they begin their romantic and sexual relationship.

The last "diary entry" in the novel is a clear, although comic, statement on the connection between the romance narrative and the mother/daughter narrative:

Tuesday, 26 December

**4 a. m.** Have finally realized the secret of happiness with men, and it is with deep regret, rage and an overwhelming sense of defeat that I have to put it in the words of an adulteress, criminal's accomplice and G-list celebrity:

'Don't say "what," say "pardon," darling, and do as your mother tells you.' (267)

Though the connection between the story of Bridget's mother issues and that of her relationship with Mark may seem similar to the intertwining of the two narratives of female identity and heterosexual romance in the traditional romance novel, the connection does not operate in the same way. To begin with, the intertwining of the two stories—or their impact on each other—is not the central narrative point of the novel. As I discuss above, the Mark/Bridget romance gets very little narrative attention (although it could certainly be characterized as a present or organizing absence), until the last quarter of the novel. Secondly, Bridget's relationship with her mother never really grows or

reaches any resolution. Mrs. Jones is still as self-absorbed as ever, and she and Bridget never come to any real understanding of each other (a brief moment of such understanding does appear in the sequel, only to be dispelled quickly). Thus, both the narratives of the heterosexual romance and the heroine's relationship with her mother become a backdrop for the novel's larger work—the representation of feminine identity in and of itself—rather than the narratives that drive that representation.

Anna Maxted's *Behaving Like Adults*, as its title implies, connects the narrative of the heroine's growth even more clearly to the central romance narrative. And, in what could be considered a "modern" twist, the hero's growth is almost as much an issue as the heroine's. The protagonist, Holly, describes herself near the beginning of the story as "a woman resisting adulthood," an "impostor" grownup (12, 15).

Do adults think, This book I'm reading matches my pajamas? Blush when a shop assistant calls them "madam"? Feel heartless when trading in their rusty old car for a shiny new one? Fold a black-and-white-checked tablecloth onto the cat's head and proclaim her Yasser Alleycat? . . . No? Well then. I was an adult at work . . . but I refused to be that at home. Inside, I was still a little girl. Because you're not truly grown up until you're what, fifty? (15)

One of the novel's narrative trajectories, then, charts Holly's transformation from pink-clad girl who dresses her cat in whimsical costumes to a woman who feels able to tread the "thin . . . line between caution and idiocy" (381).

Holly's journey into adulthood—and an adult relationship—can be read as, to use Radway's words, "an account of a woman's journey to female personhood *as that particular psychic figuration is constructed and realized within patriarchal culture*," thus making her similar to the traditional romance heroine (138). Yet, the novel diverges narratively from the earlier texts in a couple of important ways—the first of which is its focus on the growth of both members of the couple, not just the female protagonist.

Holly's relationship with her fiancé, Nick, is, at the beginning, described as especially childlike. Being with Nick, a children's party entertainer, "was not about being adult," Holly narrates. "We gave each other permission to behave like babies" (10). This mutual immaturity, however, is portrayed as the main problem in their relationship and the reason for their break-up as the story begins. Thus, a second, equally important narrative traces the pair's development from immature partners-in-crime to a more grownup, albeit still quirky and optimistic, couple ready for a serious commitment. By the end of the novel, Holly has reached a certain level of maturity—one that includes a better understanding of her parents' values, a more assertive personality, and the ability to cope with a profound personal trauma (which I discuss below). Likewise, Nick, while still offbeat and carefree, has also grown enough to take his place as a patriarchal male in a traditional adult heterosexual relationship. At the end of the novel, Holly and Nick, both more "grownup" and self-aware, literally walk offstage toward marriage. (The last scene in the novel has the couple on stage after a friend's play, each with the intention of proposing to the other.) The narrative of Holly and Nick's break-up and eventual reconciliation, then, is told specifically as a story in which attaining mature selfhood exists in direct relation to one's entry into a mongerous heterosexual relationship.

Perhaps more importantly than its dual narrative focus on both members of the central couple, however, *Behaving Like Adults* adds a particularly contemporary element to the story of its heroine's psychological growth. Near the beginning of the novel, Holly is sexually assaulted by Stuart, a man she's been out with twice. The trauma of the rape plays a significant part in both Holly's personal growth narrative and in the development of Holly and Nick as a (heterosexual, patriarchal) couple. At the beginning, Holly

attributes the attack to her own naiveté and passivity. “I was too damn polite,” she says of why she didn’t fight her attacker. “I didn’t want to offend Stuart” (38). Indeed, the rape scene portrays an uncomfortable but obliging Holly misreading—or ignoring—several danger signals in her desire to be a nice person. (*None* of this is to say that the novel places any blame for the attack on Holly. Stuart is clearly presented as a despicable character, and Holly’s trauma is treated as real and undeserved.)

By the end of the story, however, Holly is able to take action against her attacker and shed some of her more naïve views, even as she maintains her sense of optimism and romance.

Where was my sense of optimism? . . . The old Holly was forever being teased by Nick for her sunshine outlook on the world. Now, I was more cautious. But green shoots of the old me were growing amid the rubble and I couldn’t help wonder how thin the line between caution and idiocy. Like most of us, I’d been knocked around a bit by life and yet I realized my instinct was—*still was*—to think the best of people. I didn’t want to be like [my sister], stubborn against the chance of happiness. (383)

In an indirect way, the maturity (if it can be characterized as such) that Holly and Nick both gain in dealing with the rape also allows them to reunite as a grown-up, monogamous heterosexual couple at the end of the novel.

It should be mentioned here that rape also often figures in the traditional romance novel. The heroine may be attacked by a villainous male, or even (either through mistaken identity or “overwhelming passion”) the novel’s intended hero. Radway notes that the readers in her study distinguish between the two, denouncing the former as horrendous, but willing to justify the latter if it is shown to be a result of the hero’s “passion or jealousy” (76). In either case, as Radway suggests, rape in the romance novel becomes a space where readers can work out their own anxieties about patriarchy and sexual violence. The sexual assault in *Behaving Like Adults* also functions as a space in

which to explore fears about rape, particularly the growing contemporary awareness of the phenomenon of date or acquaintance rape. Yet, where the assaults in romance novels—particularly historical romances—are constructed as limited to individual experience or to the relationship between one man and one woman, *Adults* places rape and its victim within a larger culture and system of institutions that exist to help (albeit in an often limited way) the victim. Though she is at first reluctant to tell anyone what has happened to her, Holly eventually reports the rape, and is presented dealing with police and attending sessions with a rape crisis counselor. Moreover, rape is represented as a trauma that threatens all women. It turns out that Stuart has assaulted a number of women besides Holly, and Holly's housekeeper has also been a victim of rape. By placing sexual violence within this larger cultural and institutional context, the novel not only conveys the continued presence and urgency of the issue, but constructs the victim as someone who is not alone and who has options—and a system of support—for prosecuting her attacker. Such a construction is particularly important for contemporary readers who have been bombarded by discourses on preventing or recovering from sexual assault, or who may be victims themselves.

In addition to their protagonists' "extra-curricular" sexual relationships and their focus on the heroine's developing identity, the communities portrayed in many chick culture texts also divert narrative and ideological weight from the ostensibly central heterosexual romance. In the *Bridget Jones* novels, this community takes the form of what Bridget calls her "urban family"—her equally single friends Shazzer, Jude and Tom.<sup>2</sup> While Bridget's actual family offers little emotional support (her overbearing,

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<sup>2</sup> One of the most disappointing aspects of the *Bridget Jones* film adaptation is the diminished presence and importance of Bridget's "urban family." The decreased role of Bridget's friends in the film could be

self-absorbed mother leaves her father after forty years of marriage in order to experience relationships with other men, and her brother plays almost no role in the story) she and her network of “singleton” friends are always available to offer each other support and (sometimes comically misguided) advice. When Tom disappears for a few days (and after they determine he’s not just “enjoying honeymoon-style shag hideaway for a few days”), Bridget, Shazzer and Jude alert his other friends to his absence and spend the day searching for him (227). Tom finally turns up (he’d been hiding out in his own apartment after getting dumped by his boyfriend and undergoing plastic surgery), and immediately claims that “nobody loves [him]” (231). Bridget, however, points out the number of people that are concerned about him. “I told him to ring my answerphone, which held twenty-two frantic messages from his friends, all distraught because he had disappeared for twenty-four hours,” she records, “which put paid to all our fears about dying alone and being eaten by an Alsatian” (231). In *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, and in other novels like Marian Keyes’s *Last Chance Saloon* (1999) and movies such as *The Sweetest Thing*, the “urban family” often provides—or at least supplements—the emotional closeness and support expected from the traditional nuclear family. More importantly, the bonds of the urban family are often as strong, if not stronger, than those of the central romantic relationship.

The conclusion of the Bridget Jones sequel, *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*, hints that the urban family—and indeed the woman’s life outside the romantic relationship—can be such an attractive alternative to heterosexual monogamy that it can,

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attributed to the constraints of adapting a two hundred-page novel into a ninety-minute motion picture. However, the fact that the friends’ screen time is cut in order to allow more time for the central romance(s) speaks to mainstream film’s continued reliance on—and reification of—heterosexual romance narratives.



at least momentarily, place question marks around the happy romantic conclusion. When, at the end of the novel, Mark asks Bridget to move to Los Angeles with him, her initial response is atypical of the traditional romantic heroine:

I thought hard. I thought about Jude and Shazzer, and Agnès B on Westbourne Grove, and cappuccinos in Coins, and Oxford Street.

'Bridget?' he said gently. 'It's very warm and sunny there and they have swimming pools.'

'Oh,' I said, eyes darting interestedly from one side to the other.

I'll wash up,' he promised. (337)

Of course, the Bridget Jones novels remain true to chick-lit conventions (and the conventions of romantic comedy in general), and Bridget does go with Mark (although to Thailand, not to Los Angeles). The thought of shopping and hanging out with her friends could never seriously tempt Bridget to give up her future of (presumably) happy heterosexual monogamy. But this brief moment is significant for the anxieties it may speak to in many modern women considering marriage or other long-term commitments after years of social, financial, and emotional independence.

The notion of the urban family as an alternative to heterosexual matrimony is a necessary development in a culture where terms like "sexuality" and "family" seem to undergo continuous re-definition. Alternatives to the traditional family based on the heterosexual couple become even more crucial when one considers how oppressive patriarchal family structures have been for many women. According to Tania Modleski, the hardships women face in traditional heterosexual marriage can become literal dangers:

For feminism has emphasized from the beginning the *oppressiveness* of the ideology of compulsory heterosexuality and the institution it supports—that of the nuclear family. The family is the structural unit keeping women economically and

physically dependent on men; separating women from other women; and, in extreme (but by no means uncommon) cases, providing the space in which men may abuse women with impunity. (*Feminism* 13)

Like the *Bridget* novels, *Sex and the City* constructs a similar community—this time a group of four upper-middle class Manhattan women. The show ostensibly follows the women's romantic and sexual misadventures (three of the characters become either engaged or married over the run of the series). Indeed, one of the most appealing parts of the series is following these women as they attempt to form meaningful (primarily) heterosexual relationships in a large, impersonal, status- and consumer- oriented world. A long view of the series, however, reveals that the most significant relationships in these women's lives are those they have with each other. As Astrid Henry notes, "the women's relationships with each other—both as a group and individually—are continually depicted as these characters' primary community and family, their source of love and care" (67). This primary relationship regularly overshadows the women's various romantic entanglements, both narratively and often in the show's visual strategies.

Although the point has been made directly throughout the series's run (at one point in Season 4, when each of the friends has reached a low ebb in her romantic life, Charlotte, the eternal optimist, suggests that the women can be each other's soulmates and men just be "these great, nice guys to hang out with"), it is illustrated even more clearly in the show's final season ("The Agony and the Ex-tasy"). Samantha, the gregarious, sexually voracious member of the group, is diagnosed with breast cancer in the same episode in which Miranda marries Steve, her on-again/off-again boyfriend and the father of her son ("The Ick Factor"). The rest of the women find out about Samantha's diagnosis over the course of the episode—Samantha tells Carrie in the cab on the way to the wedding, and Charlotte and Miranda both find out at Miranda's wedding reception.

While most television series would end a wedding episode with an image of the bride and groom (especially if the relationship had played out over several seasons, as Miranda's and Steve's has), this particular show ends with an image that foregrounds the series' ostensible interest in women's relationships and community. The episode ends at Miranda's wedding reception, but not, as might be expected in a "wedding episode" of a long-running series, with a shot of the bride and groom. Instead, we see the four women sitting at a table together, comforting and supporting each other during an uncertain time. As a retreat from a larger world of heterosexual relationships still largely based on the exchange of women, the female community portrayed in *Sex and the City* in some ways echoes Luce Irigaray's vision of relationships between women when she writes, "There is room enough for everything to exist. Everything is worth exchanging, nothing is privileged, nothing is refused. Exchange? Everything is exchanged, yet there are no transactions. Between us, there are not proprietors, no purchasers, no determinable objects, no prices" (213).

Yet, while contemporary popular texts like *Sex and the City* and *Bridget Jones* offer arguably more progressive alternatives to their female readers and viewers, ultimately they are not completely progressive, nor are they free of the patriarchal and heterosexist ideologies which continue to structure the culture in which they are produced. Despite the novel's (and its adaptation's) narrative differences from traditional romances, the reader of *Bridget Jones's Diary* and the viewer of the adaptation are left with little doubt that Bridget will end up with Mark, the upright, upper-class, patriarchal representative, at the end of the story. Even more significantly, *Sex and the City*, which has carefully developed its female community over six seasons, ends on a note that

threatens to overturn its more overt feminist impulses. By the show's final season, both Charlotte and Miranda (the show's most vocal feminist) have entered into marriage and (impending) motherhood, Carrie has a happy--albeit somewhat open-ended--reunion with Mr. Big (another representative of wealthy white patriarchy), and even Samantha has given up her promiscuous ways for a monogamous relationship (admittedly one with slightly untraditional power and gender dynamics, as Samantha's partner is both younger and less socially and financially powerful than she is). These storylines are not necessarily problematic in themselves, but the fact that the majority of them are wrapped up in the series finale—Charlotte becomes a mother by adoption, Miranda builds a family with not only her husband and son, but with her Alzheimer's-stricken mother-in law, and Carrie and Big are reunited in Paris—says much about the show's underlying ideology (“An American Girl in Paris”). While the ostensible focus has been on the relationships between the four women, the various resolutions of the finale convey the notion that the true narrative thrust of the program has been to place these sexually and economically independent women in their rightful roles as wives, mothers, and committed “significant others.”

Even more problematic than the need to place their protagonists in patriarchally-defined relationships is the way that a number of contemporary chick novels, movies or programs work to silence the (arguably) prominent female voice that sets them apart from earlier women's texts. This silence is literal in *Sex and the City*, as the Carrie/Parker voice-overs and the “question of the week” device are greatly diminished or even absent altogether in the show's final two episodes. This lack of “voice” is attributable to a narrative development in which Carrie gives up her newspaper column (the motivation

for both the questions and much of the voice-over) and moves to Paris to be with a famous artist who is both older and quite obviously out of her social and economic class. The show thus curtails its engagement in the important outlets for women's writing and speaking, both within the narrative itself (Carrie's column) and in its extradiegetic devices.

A more chilling example of the silenced "chick" heroine can be found in the final scene of the *Bridget Jones* film adaptation. Just as Mark and Bridget are about to come together as a couple, Mark discovers Bridget's diary and reads the less-than-flattering things Bridget has written about him over the course of their sometimes-contentious relationship. He strides out of Bridget's apartment, leaving Bridget (clad only in a tank top, underpants, and a cardigan sweater) to chase after him in the snow, pleading and offering apologies. When Bridget finally catches up with him, her words disavow not only what she wrote about Mark (she didn't really mean it) but the significance of this woman's writing itself. "It's only a diary," she pleads, begging his forgiveness. "Everyone knows diaries are just full of crap." The scene does not, however, stop at having the woman reject her own voice. Mark replies that he knows she didn't mean what she wrote, and that he was just buying her a new diary for a "new start." All is forgiven, and Bridget is wrapped in Mark's strong arms and warm winter coat. It is a happy romantic ending—one accompanied by snow, warm lighting, and the ubiquitous "Someone Like You" on the soundtrack—but one that can only be achieved when the woman submits her story and her voice to masculine control. She must give up her diary for one provided her by patriarchy.

It is difficult to deny, then, that recent popular texts aimed particularly at young, single women share the same conservative ideology of their generic predecessors. They are, after all, produced by and within the same male-dominated culture. Still, these contemporary works provide important new visions of new possibilities for women's voices, communities, and experience as sexual beings. They are not utopian feminist texts by any means, but they go beyond other bodies of earlier "women's texts," which had been even more tightly bound by patriarchal definitions of feminine subjectivity and sexuality. Chick novels, films and television shows provide spaces for the expression of female desire and subjectivity, and for the exploration of emotional and social alternatives to heterosexual monogamy. In doing so, they are a set of "women's texts" which are truly for women, presenting affirmative notions of female subjectivity, sexuality and community.

CHAPTER 5  
CONCLUSION:  
LOVE ACTUALLY IS ALL AROUND

*It's a sign that I have watched this movie too many times!*  
--Annie (Meg Ryan), *Sleepless in Seattle*

I want to end this study as I began: with the image of a woman watching a romance. In *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* (2003), Andie Anderson (Kate Hudson) sits at a "Chick Flick Marathon" engrossed in watching the end of *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993).<sup>1</sup> "This is my favorite movie of all time," she sighs to her date Ben (Matthew McConaughey). "I love sharing this with you." While this moment may appear similar to the one I describe from *Sleepless in Seattle* at the beginning of this study, there is an important difference. Andie is not the hyperfeminine, romance-obsessed, pastel-wearing girl she appears to be, but rather a (supposedly) savy, independent magazine writer playing the role of a hyperfeminine, romance-obsessed, pastel-wearing girl in order to write a story about all the things women do in relationships to drive men away. Andie's performance—including loudly asking Ben what he's thinking and obstructing the view of the theater's other patrons by stretching in her seat to nuzzle and hug Ben—ultimately leads to a confrontation in which Ben is punched an extremely large man who has been sitting behind them (ironically, the man is the only one of the three who is genuinely invested in the movie). After the altercation the man tearfully announces that he's "going

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<sup>1</sup> The term "chick flick" in this context is not used, as I have used it in Chapter Four, to refer to a specific set of texts that emerged in the late 1990s, but rather as an umbrella term to include romantic comedies and other films popularly believed to be enjoyed by female viewers. (Other films on the marquee at the beginning of this scene are *Mystic Pizza* (1988) and *When Harry Met Sally . . .* (1989)).

back in to finish watching *Sleepless in Seattle*,” and warns that no one had better “screw with” him as he tries to enjoy the film. This moment occurs in a film that for the most part follows the romantic comedy conventions exemplified by *Sleepless in Seattle* (including the happy romantic reunion on a New York landmark), but I want here to use this scene as an entry point for questions about romantic comedy ten years after *Sleepless*. If, more than a decade on, the conventions and iconography of contemporary romantic comedy have become so familiar and institutionalized that they can be played with (or in some cases, parodied), and if, as some would argue, the quality and appeal of the genre have diminished in recent years, does it no longer perform the same operations for its female viewers it did in the late 1980s and 90s?<sup>2</sup> Are the fantasies that romantic comedy offers and the desires and anxieties it addresses still necessary for women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

Rick Altman writes that

Every generic system is made up of an interconnected network of user groups and their supporting institutions, each using the genre to satisfy its own needs and desires. While at any given point a generic system may appear perfectly balanced and thus at rest, the look of stability is actually produced only by a momentary equilibrium of countervailing concerns. (195)

As we have seen, from the late 1980s through the mid-to-late 1990s romantic comedy seemed to exhibit the type of stability to which Altman refers, narratively and aesthetically. The genre had established stars (Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks, Julia Roberts), established stories (the smart, quirky career woman finds the smart, non-threatening man of her dreams), and even established settings (often the bookstores, coffee shops, and

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<sup>2</sup> An even more overt parody of the romantic comedy is Joel and Ethan Coen's *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003), starring George Clooney and Catherine Zeta-Jones. This film borrows elements of contemporary romantic comedy—and Classical Hollywood screwball comedy—and turns them inside out. The result is a black comedy so excessive in both its grotesque and its romantic elements that it exposes the conventions of the romantic comedy *as* conventions, despite its “happy” romantic ending.



shabby-chic apartments of Manhattan). Even the chick flicks and chick lit that seemed to split off from the genre beginning in the late 1990s displayed a strong sense of coherence, as most were based on the Bridget Jones model of the somewhat flaky young woman trying to find romantic and career stability in the big city. As I have shown, both forms of romantic comedy, while they may ultimately be conservative in their ideology, emerged and succeeded because they spoke to the hopes and concerns of women living in late-twentieth century America.

Yet, as the new millennium goes on, the romantic comedy genre seems to be experiencing a sort of fatigue. This is not to say that romantic comedies are any less viable at the box office. *Sweet Home Alabama* (2002) made over \$120 million dollars in its U.S. theatrical run, *How to Lose a Guy* took in over \$105 million, and *Two Week's Notice* (2002) and *Maid in Manhattan* (2002) both grossed more than \$93 million (imdb.com). None of these films, however, seems poised to become as iconic as *When Harry Met Sally . . .* (1989) or *Pretty Woman* (1990). (An exception, in my mind, is *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), an adaptation of an iconic novel that received positive critical recognition and fared relatively well at the box office.) The critical reception of many of these movies bears out the generic fatigue: A number of reviews for *How to Lose a Guy*, even some of those which are arguably more positive, point out the film's cliché's (www.rottentomatoes.com). This sense of "been there, seen that," however, has not been limited to a few films. In 2003, *Entertainment Weekly* ran a story on the clichés that seem to have taken over romantic comedy. "Few Hollywood products are as reliable as the romantic comedy," writes the author, Gillian Flynn. "By 'romantic comedy' I mean, of course, the 'date movie,' a. k. a. the 'Did I have a stroke, or haven't I seen this

all before?’ flick” (“A Belittle Romance”). A few of the clichés Flynn would like to see banished are the “busy, uptight heroine” and the New York setting (including all the “type-A” publishing/advertising/fashion-industry characters to be found there).

At the same time that critics have remarked on the formulaic nature of most recent romantic comedies, those figures most strongly associated with the genre at its height have begun disassociating themselves from it. As I have discussed in the chapter on Meg Ryan romances, Ryan has almost always expressed the desire to separate herself from her romantic comedy persona, and in the past years has worked even harder to do so. As of this writing she has not appeared in a romantic comedy since *Kate and Leopold* (2001), instead choosing to concentrate on roles far removed from her “America’s Sweetheart” persona such as the boxing drama *Against the Ropes* (2004) and the erotic thriller *In the Cut* (2003) (neither film was critically or commercially successful; the latter picture gained most of its press from the fact that Ryan appears nude in it). As Ryan withdraws from the romantic comedy arena, a certain amount of popular press has been given to the question of her successor in the genre. Two possibilities often mentioned in the popular press are Kate Hudson, who also stars in the romances *Alex & Emma* (2003) and *Le Divorce* (2003), and Reese Witherspoon, who stars in *Sweet Home Alabama* (2002) as well as the chick flick *Legally Blonde* (2001) and its sequel. Neither actress, however, seems ready—or quite right—to succeed Ryan romantic comedy icon. With the exception of *How to Lose a Guy*, Hudson’s romances and chick flicks have fared poorly with both audiences and critics. Witherspoon’s forays into the genre have been more successful, but something about her persona, perhaps the association with her earlier, edgier roles in films like *Freeway* (1996) and *Election* (1999), makes it unclear whether

she can serve as the same safe, yet ultimately complex figure for examining the questions facing contemporary women that Ryan once did.

It is not only, however, romantic comedy films which seem to be suffering from genre fatigue. As more and more "chick lit" is published every month, the demand for new product often outweighs the quality of what is offered. Anna Weinberg writes that "many of these [chick lit] titles are trash . . . that threatens to flood the market in women's reading." *Marketing to Women* notes that "some editors have noticed a shift in tone" in new chick novels, "from an emphasis on expressing the reality of women's experience to a portrayal of that experience in more trivial terms" (9). As one remedy to the chick lit glut, lines like Red Dress Ink have recently begun expanding their storyline range by offering "second chance" stories with married, thirty-something protagonists like Isabel Wolff's *Out of the Blue* (2001), and 2004 saw the release of several novels with widows as heroines (Danford 59). Despite concerns over a glut in the chick-lit market or a (perceived or actual) fall-off in quality, however, at least a couple of brightly-colored, lipstick-and-stiletto-adorned covers can still be found among the new releases at book retailers each month.

Indeed, the continued presence and arguable success of romantic comedy and chick culture texts, despite a sense of genre fatigue, suggest that the questions they examine and the anxieties and hopes they address are still as relevant as they were at the time of the genre's emergence. A particular form of post-feminism may argue that the issues of the sexual revolution and the women's movement have been resolved and that women can now relax and enjoy their sexual power and independence, but the continued production and consumption of texts which continue to examine these issues (regardless of the

quality of these texts) indicate that the need for them remains strong. *How to Lose a Guy*, for example, may play comically on a stereotype of hyperfemininity, but despite this running joke it ultimately becomes a discourse on just what it means to be a young woman with both career and romantic aspirations at the turn of the millennium. In doing so, the film both constructs conservative fantasies for its viewers (in the end it shows how to *win* a guy in ten days) and at least makes a nod to more progressive ideas (Andie may write cute “how-to” pieces for a women’s glossy, but what she really wants is to write on socio-political issues—and the film ends with the implication that she will be able to fulfill this goal). *Laws of Attraction* (2004), a romance between high-powered divorce lawyers Pierce Brosnan and Julianne Moore that draws heavily on the Hepburn/Tracy classic *Adam’s Rib*, examines both the plight of the uptight, career-obsessed single woman and the (im)possibility of marriage—particularly the combination of marriage and career—in contemporary culture. The film’s answers to these questions are finally arguably more regressive (the single woman finds happiness married to a man who can loosen her up) and less satisfying than those offered through Hepburn and Tracy five decades earlier. As we can see, then, discourses on women’s desires continue to circulate and to perform the same complex, yet predominately conservative operations they have for decades.

Yet, these texts perform an even more significant function as the socio-political climate in which they are produced and consumed becomes even more uncertain, and even frightening. In a paper on the post-9/11 chick flick presented at the 2004 conference of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, Diane Negra argues that the romantic comedy, particularly the New York-based romance, performs a particularly conservative

function in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001. For Negra, the post-9/11 romance “[shores] up the ideological boundaries of gender and home” as “national boundaries [are being breeched].” More specifically, Negra contends that these texts mobilize a “drama of mis-wanting” that points out the “solipsism of single white femininity.” These texts, she concludes, present “traditionalism” as the correct response to a “changed national climate.” Negra makes some valid points, particularly regarding these films’ overt impulse to reinforce traditional notions of gender. It is not surprising that texts produced after a trauma on the scale of 9/11 would appeal to desires for some element of tradition and fixed categories (in this case of gender) in a time of uncertainty. I would suggest, however, as I have throughout this project, that these films and the possible readings they offer are more complex than their overly conservative tone might indicate.

What is perhaps more important about these films, however, is the evidence that, while its subject matter may seem to be the ahistorical idea of romantic love, the romantic comedy is as responsive to its historical moment as more overtly political genres like action or war movies.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the romance can act as a space to work through the events of 9/11 precisely *because* romantic relationships seem to exist apart from larger historical or political events. Because it operates at a safe remove from these events, romance becomes a site for examining them obliquely or metaphorically, without fully experiencing the anxiety attached to them. (In some cases this effacement is literal. *Serendipity* (2001), the first mainstream romantic comedy to be released after 9/11, was altered to remove images of the World Trade Center from its opening.) Thus, post-9/11

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<sup>3</sup>Indeed, representations of romantic love is *never* ahistorical, as I have shown throughout this study.

romances such as *Two Weeks Notice* take on an additional layer of signification when read in their historical context.<sup>4</sup> They still address the same questions of gender, sexual relationships, and female desire and subjectivity as romances released in the late 1980s and 1990s, for these questions still persist. At the same time, however the romance becomes a way of (often implicitly) responding to an increasingly frightening world.

In *Two Weeks*, for example, the trauma of 9/11 is indirectly yet unmistakably addressed through the construction of the central romance. The heroine, Lucy (Sandra Bullock), is a crusading attorney with a special interest in saving New York landmarks. "I just can't watch another building get knocked down," she tells her father at one point in the film—a line that can be read more largely as a response to the collapse of the World Trade Center towers. The male love interest, George (Hugh Grant), is a real estate developer whose latest project threatens a landmark Lucy wishes to preserve (the premise for their first meeting and subsequent relationship). Though the romance is clearly a site for discourses on class and the ethics of capitalism, it also becomes a means of addressing both the hopes and anxieties evoked by 9/11. In one significant scene, Lucy and George fly over a golden, sun-kissed Manhattan, exclaiming over the beauty of the city and quizzing each other on its architectural history. Tellingly, their conversation focuses on the Chrysler Building and the Empire State Building, two New York landmarks that are arguably more iconic than the World Trade Center and that both pre-date and survive the Twin Towers. This scene is a conscious effort to (re)construct New York (and by

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<sup>4</sup>The most deliberately overt post-9/11 romance is arguably Richard Curtis's *Love Actually* (2003). The film opens with a voice-over that directly references the events of September 11, and begins and ends with video footage of "real people" greeting and saying goodbye to each other at Heathrow Airport.

extension the U. S.) as a beautiful, resilient space with a long history that cannot be marked permanently by an act of terrorism, no matter how horrific.

This moment of hope, however, is undercut by the lingering anxieties that must have—at least unconsciously—dictated the setting and tone of the film's conclusion. The film ends with Lucy and George no longer in Manhattan, but in Brooklyn (she has gone to work for Legal Aid, and he has quit his job after realizing how much Lucy and her ideals mean to him). The last shot shows Lucy and George happily together in the confined, yet cozy space of Lucy's parents' tiny Coney Island apartment. In the end, then, the romantic couple acts out a more anxious response to a post-9/11 world: a retreat that is both literal (from Manhattan to Brooklyn) and figurative (a return to the parental nest). While this scene can, as Negra would argue, be read as presenting "traditionalism" (the heterosexual couple in the family home) as the "right response to a changed national climate," it also presents a response that is at once more complex (the patriarchal male has, after all, renounced the position in the capitalist system that contributes to his economic and social power, thereby diminishing some of the conservative overtones of this scene) and more visceral (in some ways it can be read similarly to the small child's desire for the safety of her parents' arms after a scare or injury).

As we have seen, then, romantic comedy is always, despite its fluffy, insubstantial appearance, responsive to the larger culture, whether it participates in discourses on gender and sexual relationships or engages specific historical or political events. Like screwball comedies or the woman's film, contemporary romantic comedy is not a fixed category, but rather a moment in a generic continuum that has emerged in response to a particular set of cultural and historical factors. This responsiveness means that, despite

moments of continuity and cohesion, the genre will continue to transform itself and its boundaries will remain fluid (despite my reliance on the term “genre” to describe it in this project). The romance genre will no doubt continue to change as it adapts to shifts in the larger culture, and in future decades the romantic comedy as it exists at the turn of the millennium may be replaced by a new set of romance texts with different concerns and modes of address. At the current moment, however, romantic comedies remain an important tool for examining contemporary notions of sex and gender and a potent source of fantasies for reconciling seemingly irreconcilable desires. And they most likely will continue to do so as long as the sexual climate in which women must operate makes such fantasies necessary.



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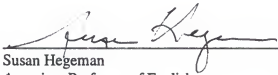
### BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Andrea Rochelle Mabry received the degree of Doctor of Philosophy through the Film and Media Studies Program in the University of Florida Department of English in December 2004. She earned a master's degree in English from East Carolina University in 1999.

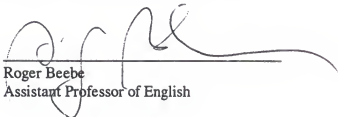
I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to the acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English.

  
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